FACTSHEET CHOLERA

Expertenkomitee für Reisemedizin
Comité d'experts pour la médecine des voyages
Comitato di esperti per la medicina di viaggio
Expert committee for travel medicine

Key aspects briefly summarized

- Cholera is a severe diarrheal disease that can lead to severe dehydration within hours.
- It is transmitted through contaminated food or drinks, or through the stool of a sick person.
- Risk for most travelers is extremely low; outbreaks mainly occur where clean water and sanitation are lacking.
- Prompt rehydration is the most important treatment.
- Vaccination is only recommended for travelers at higher risk, such as aid or healthcare workers in outbreak areas.



A woman in Haiti collects water in a bucket during the 2010 cholera outbreak. Kena Betancur/Reuters/Newscom

Disease

Cholera is an acute intestinal infection caused by the bacterium *Vibrio cholerae*. It can cause severe, watery diarrhea that leads to rapid dehydration if left untreated

Occurrence / Risk areas

Cholera occurs mainly in areas with poor sanitation and limited access to clean drinking water, including those devastated by war or natural catastrophes. In the last decades, outbreaks occurred in sub-Saharan Africa, Middle-East, South and Southeast Asia, and Haiti. The risk for most tourists is extremely low.

Transmission

Cholera spreads through contaminated drinking water or food (especially raw or undercooked seafood), or through contact with the stool of an infected person. Direct person-to-person spread is uncommon.

Symptoms

Symptoms usually start 12 hours to 5 days after infection. Most infected people have mild or no symptoms. Some develop sudden, watery diarrhea ("rice-water" stools), vomiting and abdominal cramps, usually without fever. Severe cases can lose large amounts of fluid quickly, leading to dangerous dehydration.

Treatment

Drink oral rehydration solution as soon as symptoms start. Severe cases need urgent medical care with intravenous fluids and antibiotics. Seek medical help immediately if you have severe watery diarrhea while travelling.

Prevention

Follow safe food and water precautions: drink only bottled, boiled or treated water; avoid ice; eat thoroughly cooked food; peel fruit yourself; wash your hands often with soap. Vaccination is not needed for most travelers but may be considered for people at higher risk, such as humanitarian or healthcare workers in outbreak areas.

Of note

- Cholera is very rare among typical tourists – good hygiene practices give excellent protection.
- Discuss with a travel medicine clinic if you think you may be at increased risk.

Further Information

- CDC – Travelers' Health: Cholera – https://wwwnc.cdc.gov/travel/page/cholera-travel-information
- ECDC – Cholera – https://www.ecdc.europa.eu/en/cholera
- TravelHealthPro (NaTHNaC) – Cholera – https://travelhealthpro.org.uk/disease-details.php?dis=32
- WHO – Cholera – https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/cholera
- WikiTropica – Cholera – https://wikitropica.org/illustrated-notes/bacteria/cholera/

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