

# **West Virginia VRE Workgroup's Information for Patients and Families Regarding Vancomycin-Resistant Enterococcus**

## **What is VRE?**

VRE stands for Vancomycin-Resistant Enterococcus. VRE is a type of enterococcus bacteria that has developed resistance to the antibiotic vancomycin and to most other antibiotics. An individual can be “colonized” with VRE (the bacteria is present but does not cause disease) or “infected” with VRE (the bacteria causes signs or symptoms of disease). The most common VRE infections are urinary tract infections, wound infections, and bloodstream infections.

## **How do individuals get VRE?**

The enterococcus bacteria is a normal bacteria found in the intestines and female genital tract of many individuals. Thus, individuals with VRE infections often develop disease from the bacteria they already carry. However, person-to-person transmission of this bacteria can also occur either through direct contact (e.g., unwashed hands) or by indirect contact (e.g., via contaminated equipment or environmental surfaces).

## **How do you treat VRE?**

Only VRE infection is treated (i.e., when the bacteria causes actual disease). Often VRE infections are difficult to treat because the organism no longer responds to many antibiotics. At times, treatment is limited to antibiotic combinations or experimental therapy. Colonization with VRE is not treated.

## **How will VRE impact recovery?**

This depends on the individual patient and the type of VRE infection involved. Because treatment of VRE infection is often difficult, it may involve longer hospitalization and treatment with antibiotics. Health care workers will also need to take special precautions (like handwashing, use of gloves, etc.) to prevent spread of VRE to other patients. With VRE colonization (the bacteria is present but not causing disease), health care workers may need to take the same precautions to prevent spread; however, recovery from other illnesses should not be significantly affected.

## **How long will VRE last?**

The length of illness caused by VRE infection depends upon the severity of the infection, the response to antibiotic therapy, and the individual's overall health. After infection has resolved, the individual can, but does not always, remain colonized with VRE. Some individuals are colonized with the bacteria and never develop infection. Colonization can last indefinitely.

## **Can I give my family members VRE infection?**

Healthy people are not usually at risk of serious VRE disease. Those at increased risk include people with chronic illnesses, recent surgery, poor immune systems, and those with urinary catheters or central lines.

## **What precautions should be followed when I go home?**

Handwashing is the most important measure. If you require continued care at home, then you, or whoever is caring for you, should wear gloves when handling body fluids (urine, wound drainage, feces, etc.) and wash hands with warm, soapy water after providing care, handling body fluids, or contacting surfaces contaminated with body fluids. Disposable items soiled with body fluids (dressings, diapers, used gloves, etc.) should be tied in a plastic bag before placing in the trash. Good household cleaning with a household disinfectant is adequate. Laundry can be done according to manufacturer's directions using standard detergent. Add bleach for items heavily soiled with body fluids. Dishes and utensils can be washed as usual.