

Is cholera hiding in your water?

by Isabel Basson

Cholera often occurs in Southern Africa, making a lot of people sick at a time. Cholera is caused by bacteria that live in fresh water. This disease mostly affects people in rural areas who do not have access to tap water. It also occurs more often after heavy rains. Cholera causes severe watery diarrhoea that can lead to death if it is not treated.

Cholera shows very suddenly in a person. The bacteria grow within six hours to five days. It is also dependant on humans to survive. One can get cholera not only from water, but also from foods that have been near contaminated water or have been washed in contaminated water. Fruits and vegetables that have been irrigated with infected water might contain the disease. Also be careful of fresh water fish.

Symptoms

Most cholera infections are so mild, that you cannot tell it from other mild diarrhoea. The symptoms of more severe cases are:

- Dehydration (your body does not have enough water). The symptoms include a rapid pulse rate, dry skin, extreme thirst, sleepiness and infrequent urination
- Very severe diarrhoea that is watery
- Abdominal cramps
- Nausea and vomiting

Prevention

When your community is affected by cholera, you can take the following steps to prevent it from spreading:

- Dispose of human waste away from drinking water sources
- Wash hands often, especially before working with food
- Boil water and milk before use. Chlorinate the water if possible
- Cook all food in treated water and eat it while it is still warm. Reheat leftovers properly
- Do not let several people eat out of one container.

Treatment

Although cholera can be life threatening, it is easily prevented and treated. The most important treatment is rehydration, that is getting fluids back into the body. When a person suffers from severe diarrhoea, he loses a lot of fluids that the body needs to work properly. If left untreated, cholera can result in death as a result of dehydration.

If the person is not so sick, he can drink a pre-packed mixture of sugar and salts to drink with a lot of water. You can get this mixture from your local health care worker. If the person is too weak to drink, he must be taken to the hospital, where he will receive fluids intravenously with a drip. Small children should also be taken to the hospital, because they dehydrate very quickly. **UM**