

20 March 2023

UPDATE ON LOCAL OUTBREAK OF CHOLERA

Dear Member

Please read the following information in light of the cholera cases reported recently in Gauteng province:

WHAT IS CHOLERA?

Cholera is an acute diarrheal illness resulting from an infection of the intestines by a bacteria. While some individuals may have mild or no symptoms; and can be treated with oral rehydration solutions (ORS), others may present with a severe watery diarrhoea leading to dehydration and shock. Symptoms can appear within twelve hours or up to five days after eating or drinking contaminated food or water. Cholera affects individuals of all ages and can be fatal if left untreated. (1)

IS SOUTH AFRICA FACING A LOCAL OUTBREAK?

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines a cholera outbreak as the occurrence of at least one confirmed cholera case with evidence of local transmission in an area where cholera is not regularly found (1). As of 28 February 2023, the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD) confirmed six cases of cholera (including one death) in Gauteng province. The cases are all adults aged between 19 and 44 years old. Of the six cases, two were locally acquired, two were infected in Malawi, one case had direct contact with a Malawi case and one case is still under investigation. According to the Gauteng Department of Health (DoH), the current outbreak is not linked to tap water, and they maintain that the water is safe to drink. (2)

HOW DOES IT SPREAD?

Cholera is spread through ingesting food or water contaminated with the cholera bacteria. The disease can spread rapidly in places with poor sanitation and inadequate treatment of drinking water. (3)

WHAT ARE THE COMPLICATIONS OF CHOLERA?

Cholera can cause complications especially if it is left untreated. Complications include severe dehydration, electrolyte imbalances, kidney failure accompanied by shock and even death. Prompt diagnosis and treatment of cholera can help prevent complications and improve outcomes; it's important to seek medical attention if cholera is suspected. (4)

HOW IS IT TREATED?

Cholera can be effectively treated by drinking ORS dissolved in one litre of clean water. While adults may need up to six litres of ORS, severely dehydrated patients may require intravenous (IV) fluids and appropriate antibiotics. Supplementation with zinc is also recommended for children. The use of antibiotics can shorten the duration of the disease. However, it is important to note that mass administration of antibiotics is not recommended as there is no evidence to suggest that it can prevent the spread of cholera. When treated promptly and properly, the fatality rate can be reduced to less than 1%. (1)

HOW CAN CHOLERA BE PREVENTED?

Cholera is a deadly disease that requires a comprehensive approach to prevent and reduce deaths. This includes measures such as surveillance, clean water, proper sanitation, hygiene, community engagement, treatment and vaccination with oral cholera vaccines. Countries affected by cholera are urged to improve their disease surveillance and national readiness to quickly detect and respond to outbreaks. There are currently three WHO prequalified oral cholera vaccines available, but only one of them (Dukoral®) is registered in South Africa. (1) Dukoral® is used for the prevention of cholera for travellers (from two years of age) who are visiting high-risk areas. This medication requires a prescription and should be completed at least one week prior going to potential exposure. (5)

In case of uncertainty about the safety of water, there are several methods to disinfect it but some of these methods need to be used with caution. These include boiling, using filters or adding chlorine tablets. Proper hygiene practices such as washing hands with soap and water after using the bathroom, before eating and when preparing food are essential to prevent cholera. If clean water and soap are not available, it's advisable to use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol. Lastly, it is recommended to avoid consuming raw or undercooked food to minimise the risk of cholera infection. (6)

KEY POINTS TO NOTE:

- ☑ Wash hands with soap and water
- ☑ Cook food thoroughly
- ☑ Drink safe and clean water
- ☑ Use safe sanitation facilities and safely dispose of nappies
- ☑ Clean up safely and wash clothes separate from drinking water sources
- ☑ If you have symptoms of cholera regardless of your travel history, it is important to visit the nearest health facility right away for screening and testing, early detection is crucial for successful treatment. (9)

Kind regards,
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