NHS
King's College Hospital
NHS Foundation Trust

Vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE)

Information for patients and visitors

This leaflet explains what vancomycin-resistant enterococci (VRE) is, how it affects you, how it spreads and what we can do to stop it spreading. If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to speak to the team caring for you.

What is VRE?

Enterococci are bacteria (germs) that live in the gut of most people without causing illness. This is called colonisation.

Vancomycin is an antibiotic used to treat infections such as those caused by enterococci. When enterococci become resistant to vancomycin (the antibiotic no longer works against the bacteria), they are called vancomycin-resistant enterococci or VRE.

If you have VRE, it does not mean that your infection cannot be treated with antibiotics.
It means there are fewer antibiotics that will work to treat the infection.

How is VRE spread?

It can be spread:

- from person to person by touching the hands of someone who is infected or colonised and not washing your hands afterward
- by touching room surfaces or medical equipment that have VRE on them

It is not spread through the air or by coughing or sneezing.

What is the difference between VRE infection and VRE colonisation?

Some people carry VRE bacteria in their gut which means they are colonised, as they do not have any symptoms and are not poorly. There is no need to treat people with antibiotics if they are colonised with VRE.

However, sometimes VRE can get into other parts of your body and make you feel ill. If this happens, we can use another antibiotic to treat it. Both colonised and infected people can spread the VRE bacteria.

How do I know if I have a VRE colonisation or infection?

It is impossible to tell if someone has VRE by looking at them because it is in their gut or other parts of their body and there are no signs or symptoms. Sometimes we need to screen patients to see whether they are colonised with VRE. We will do this by taking a small sample from your bottom using a cotton bud, or from a poo sample.

If we think you might have a VRE infection, we may take a blood, wound swab or urine sample and send them to a laboratory for testing.

Who is most at risk of VRE infection?

People who are at increased risk of acquiring an infection caused by VRE include those who:

- have been in hospital for a long period of time
- have weakened immune systems, are transplant patients, or are in intensive care
- are patients on dialysis
- have been treated with vancomycin before
- have medical devices inserted such as catheters or drips
- have undergone surgery involving the abdomen or chest area

What are the symptoms of a VRE infection?

You get the same symptoms as you would with any other bacterial infection. These include:

- fever
- feeling generally unwell
- fast pulse (tachycardia)
- redness on white skin tones or discolouration on darker skin tones, swelling, pain or heat at a specific site (where a medical device is inserted)

VRE can sometimes get into your bloodstream from an existing infection, such as an abscess, a urinary tract infection, infections in the tummy, or from a medical device, such as a bladder catheter or a drip into a vein. If you are infected this way, the symptoms can be the same as for other bacteria, that is, a fever, shivering and low blood pressure.

How is VRE treated?

If you are colonised with VRE you do not need any treatment. If the VRE has caused an infection, we will consider giving you antibiotics.

How can the spread of VRE be prevented?

If we find VRE in a sample taken from you while you are in hospital, we will take some extra precautions when caring for you.

- You will be moved to a side room (placed in isolation). While you are in isolation, we will ask you to avoid contact with other patients, for example, by not visiting the ward day room or going to other patients' bed areas. We will also encourage you to wash your hands before meals, and after using the toilet.
- All clinical staff must wash their hands using soap and water or alcohol hand rub before going into or leaving your room.
- Healthcare workers must wear aprons and gloves when caring for you.
- Staff must wash their hands with soap and water following glove removal.
- We will put a sign on your door to remind everyone of the precautions they need to take.

We will ask you to:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water, especially after going to the toilet
- tell staff immediately if you develop diarrhoea
- avoid touching medical devices, such as your intravenous drip, particularly at the point where they are inserted into your body or skin

What can visitors do to prevent the spread of VRE?

Friends and carers can visit you as VRE doesn't usually present a problem for fit and healthy people. To prevent the spread of VRE to other patients or elsewhere in the hospital, visitors must:

- always wash their hands using soap and water or alcohol hand rub before going into and leaving your room
- wear an apron and gloves if they are helping you with personal care
- not eat at your bed space
- not use patient bathrooms
- contact your nursing team for advice before visiting if they have had a recent infection or illness

What should I do when I go home?

Good hand and personal hygiene, regularly changing bedsheets and not sharing towels will help prevent your family and friends from getting VRE. You can wash your clothing and bed linen as normal at the hottest temperature suitable for the fabric. Try to ensure you regularly clean your toilets and bathrooms with your usual household cleaning products.

What if I need to go back into hospital or go to hospital as an outpatient?

If you are admitted back into hospital or go to hospital for an outpatient appointment, it is important that you tell the staff caring for you that you were positive for VRE in the past.

A record of this will be included in your electronic hospital notes. This will ensure that you receive the best care to reduce the risk of you developing a VRE infection. It might be helpful to take this leaflet with you to show the clinical team.

Will I always have VRE?

Once your wounds have healed or your bladder catheter has been taken out, VRE will disappear from these areas. You may still have VRE in your gut, along with 'good' bacteria, but they are unlikely to cause any problems.

Who can I contact with queries and concerns?

If you or your carers have any questions about your treatment or any information in this leaflet, please do not hesitate to ask one of the members of the nursing or medical staff on your ward.

You can also contact the Infection Prevention and Control team at our hospital sites:

King's College Hospital, Denmark Hill

Tel: **020 3299 8173**

Email: **kch-tr.KCH-IC-Nurse@nhs.net**

Princess Royal University Hospital, Orpington Hospital, Beckenham Beacon and Queen Mary's Hospital, Sidcup.

Tel: **01689 863459**

Email: **kch-tr.PRUHInfectionPreventionandControlNurses@nhs.net**

MyChart

Our MyChart app and website lets you securely access parts of your health record with us, giving you more control over your care. To sign up or for help, call us on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.mychart@nhs.net. Visit www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart to find out more.

Sharing your information

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit www.kch.nhs.uk.

Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

Tel: **020 3299 4618**
Email: **kings.pals@nhs.net**

If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email kings.access@nhs.net

PL300.5 July 2025
Review date July 2028

Corporate Nursing
Corporate Comms: 0749