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Cholera outbreak in South Africa - what you need to know



The last documented cholera outbreak in South Africa was in 2008, when 12 000 cases were reported and 65 lives were lost. Now, 15 years later, South Africans are facing the start of another outbreak.

As of 6 June 2023, 140 cases of cholera have been reported as well as a whopping 26 deaths in various cities in Limpopo, the Free State and Gauteng. As awareness of cholera rises, so are the positive cases and death toll. It is starting to feel as if South Africans are playing a big game of Pandemic and the odds are not in our favour to win.

Fortunately, with the correct preventative methods, and if we work together, we can stop this outbreak and ensure that we win this game. In this article we will explain the symptoms of cholera and share some preventative and treatment methods.

What is cholera?

Cholera is a diarrheal disease that can very quickly become deadly. The bacterium is dormant in the body for 24-48 hours before symptoms start developing. Cholera mostly lives in saltwater but can be found in freshwater as well if there are adequate nutrients and warmth.

Cholera is mostly transmitted when drinking unsafe water that had been contaminated with human faecal matter. Cholera can also be transmitted when eating uncooked shellfish sourced from contaminated water, or eating contaminated food, specifically vegetables, that have been watered or washed with unsafe water.

What are the signs of cholera?

Most people who are infected with cholera have a very mild illness and some do not feel sick at all. In its severe form, people infected with cholera will feel nauseous and vomiting may occur, but the most common trait of severe cholera is rice water diarrhoea, which is profuse, painless, watery and characterised by flecks of mucus in the stool.

A person suffering from this type of diarrhoea could lose more than 10% of normal body mass. Dehydration follows and, if left untreated, can be fatal.

What are the preventative methods of cholera?

As with the Covid-19 pandemic, handwashing is of utmost importance. Washing your hands after going to the bathroom, before and after making food, and after touching something that can possibly be unsanitary can reduce the spread of cholera drastically. If you are unsure of the safety of your water, it is also recommended that you boil your water before using it in your food or drinking it.

Vaccines are also available to fight against cholera and can help with herd immunity if enough people get vaccinated. Water should always be stored in clean, covered containers to ensure that it is not contaminated by an outside source.

Tips on the treatment of cholera

Rehydration is key to treating cholera. Those infected can drink a mixture of 1 litre of water, half a teaspoon of salt and 3 teaspoons of sugar to rehydrate, as well as to replenish electrolytes lost. Moderate to severe cholera must be treated in the hospital to ensure swift and effective rehydration. Antibiotics may also be prescribed to those with severe dehydration.

Conclusion

Over the past few weeks, cholera has struck fear in South Africans across the country, but if we all ensure that we use safe water and teach those around us who may not know about the dangers of unsafe water, we will overcome this threat.

As Barack Obama stated, '*we rise or fall together, as one nation, as one people*'. Let us ensure that we rise to the occasion and stop cholera in its tracks.

SERR Synergy provides a wide range of health and safety services to businesses that are committed to full compliance with health and safety regulations. We encourage employers to ensure that workplaces comply with the basic health and safety regulations to provide a safe working environment for their employees.

About the Author: Mariska Wiese joined SERR in October 2020. She is currently an Occupational Health and Safety Practitioner at the Pretoria branch. She has a degree in Human Physiology, Genetics and Psychology which she obtained at the University of Pretoria. She also has a certificate in Environmental Management that she obtained through NEBOSH. She contributes to the environmental and ergonomics side of OHS.

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