

# VIBRIO VULNIFICUS: The Facts



## **What is *Vibrio vulnificus*?**

*Vibrio vulnificus* is a kind of bacteria found in warm coastal waters in North Carolina. These waters include bays, estuaries, and rivers close to the ocean. On very rare occasions, people may get sick when they come into contact with *Vibrio vulnificus*. People infected with *V. vulnificus* are often hospitalized, and some die.

From 1999 to 2003, 27 North Carolinians were infected by *Vibrio vulnificus*. Most of those infections (70%) were wound infections. Many of those infections happened when people who were handling crabs cut or scratched themselves, thus exposing them to the bacteria. Other infections resulted when people with open wounds, cuts, or sores came into contact with coastal waters that contained high numbers of vibrio bacteria. Some people were infected when they ate contaminated shellfish.

## **Is *Vibrio vulnificus* related to pollution?**

No. It occurs naturally, especially during the summer months. That means that it can be found in clean coastal water, including waters that have been approved for shellfishing.

## **Whom does *Vibrio vulnificus* affect?**

People who have liver disease, diabetes mellitus, alcoholism, heart disease, cancer, or immune system disorders like AIDS are at increased risk of infection. Individuals taking drugs that suppress their immune systems, such as steroids, may also have increased susceptibility. People become infected by getting injured by shellfish or other contaminated objects, by exposing open wounds to coastal waters, or by eating raw or improperly cooked shellfish such as oysters.

## **How can I avoid infection?**

If you have one of the medical conditions listed above, you should take extra precautions to avoid exposure to coastal waters, including water in bays and estuaries. Wash exposed skin after contact with coastal water or shellfish. Use waterproof boots and gloves to prevent cuts or to protect existing wounds. People with healing or open wounds should avoid contact with estuary waters. Don't eat raw or improperly cooked seafood, especially oysters.

## **What are the symptoms of infection?**

Symptoms of infected wounds include pain, swelling, and redness that may quickly spread or blister. Nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach pain may occur 12 - 72 hours after eating contaminated shellfish.

## **What should I do if I think I have been infected?**

A delay in proper medical treatment could lead to severe infection. Although infection is extremely rare, for a very few people it may be quite severe. Severe infection could result in long hospitalization, amputation and possibly death. If you think that you have been infected, contact your doctor immediately.