What is VRE?

VRE are bugs (bacteria) that live in the bowel and that cannot be treated by certain antibiotics, such as vancomycin. VRE stands for Vancomycin Resistant Enterococci.

Can VRE be harmful?

For most patients, VRE lives harmlessly in the bowel and does not cause infection. However, sometimes VRE can cause infection, for example when patients need intensive care or while receiving chemotherapy. Antibiotics are needed to treat VRE infection. VRE can cause infections, such as kidney infections, wound infections, or in severe cases, blood infection. If a patient is more vulnerable to infection and the infection is caused by VRE, it can be difficult to treat, because many of the commonly used antibiotics will not work against VRE. Doctors need to know as soon as possible if a patient is carrying VRE so that the most effective antibiotics can be chosen to treat the infection.

How do people get VRE?

Patients who have already taken lots of antibiotics are more at risk of picking up VRE. The reason for this is that the bugs are more exposed to antibiotics and are therefore more likely to develop resistance to those antibiotics. VRE can be carried by patients, healthcare staff or visitors, either harmlessly or if they are infected with it. It can spread between patients through direct contact or by touching items or surfaces that the person with VRE may have touched, such as bed rails, toilets or equipment. As patients in hospital are much more vulnerable to infection than patients in their own homes, special precautions are required to prevent the spread of VRE between patients in hospital.

How can I help?

It is important to take special precautions to stop spreading VRE, whether or not you have VRE. If you are visiting or working with patients who are carrying VRE, you need to take extra precautions to prevent the spread of bacteria. These precautions include:

- Wearing gloves and aprons.
- Washing hands and disinfecting after touching patients.
- Disinfecting surfaces and equipment.
- Informing the nursing staff if you have diarrhoea.

If you have a positive test result for VRE, you may be asked to have isolation therapy. This means you will be separated from other patients and staff, and will be treated as though you have VRE. This helps to prevent the spread of bacteria to other patients in the hospital.

What happens when I’m ready to leave hospital?

You can go home as soon as your doctor says you are ready. It is important to take precautions to prevent VRE from spreading when you leave hospital to prevent it from spreading to other patients in your community. You should wash your hands thoroughly after using the toilet and before preparing meals or eating to stop bugs spreading to other people. Clean hands protect you and others from lots of infectionsocus.

What happens when I go home?

There is no need to take special precautions at home. People in the community are usually fit and healthy so they are less likely to pick up VRE. Clothes, bed linen and dishes can be washed as usual. It is always very important to wash your hands carefully after using the toilet and before preparing meals or eating to stop bugs spreading to other people. Clean hands protect you and others from lots of infections.

Can I be cured of VRE?

Your body may clear VRE from the bowel as you recover, but this is not always the case, and VRE may remain in the bowel for some time. Taking antibiotics can encourage VRE to grow in the bowel again, so it is important to follow the instructions of your doctor to prevent VRE from spreading between patients in hospital.