



# CHOLERA

## THE IDEA

Cholera is caused by a germ which is usually transmitted in faeces. Once cholera germs get onto someone's hands, they can easily pass onto food or water and give cholera to whoever swallows them.

Diarrhoea is the most important symptom of cholera, but not all diarrhoea is due to cholera. Diarrhoea causes the body to lose liquids. The loss of a lot of liquid from the body causes dehydration, and unless treated, this can cause death. In most cases, if people with cholera are given enough liquids, they will recover.

## What is cholera?

Cholera is an infectious disease. Watery diarrhoea is always present in cases of cholera. In severe cases this causes dehydration, which can be fatal. Epidemics are common in many parts of the world, particularly in areas where the people live close together, and there is poverty and poor sanitation. Cholera is most dangerous in older people and children less than five years old.

## What causes cholera?

Cholera is caused by a germ (*Vibrio Cholerae*) which infects a person when it is swallowed in water or food. The faeces of someone with cholera can contain millions of these germs. If fingers, clothes, bedding or earth are soiled with these faeces, they can carry cholera germs. When fingers touch anything soiled in this way, germs can be passed into the mouth, or into water or food. Sometimes people who are not sick have the germ in their faeces and can infect other people.



Cholera spreads from one person to another. The more people are infected, the quicker the disease spreads. This is how an epidemic starts. Sometimes a public water supply becomes infected.

## Recognising cholera

Sometimes cholera is mild and just like other forms of diarrhoeal disease. Severe cholera, such as occurs in epidemics, begins with very frequent, watery faeces and develops very quickly. There may be vomiting. Faeces consist of cloudy water containing blood or no solid matter; signs of

### Where and how these activities have been used

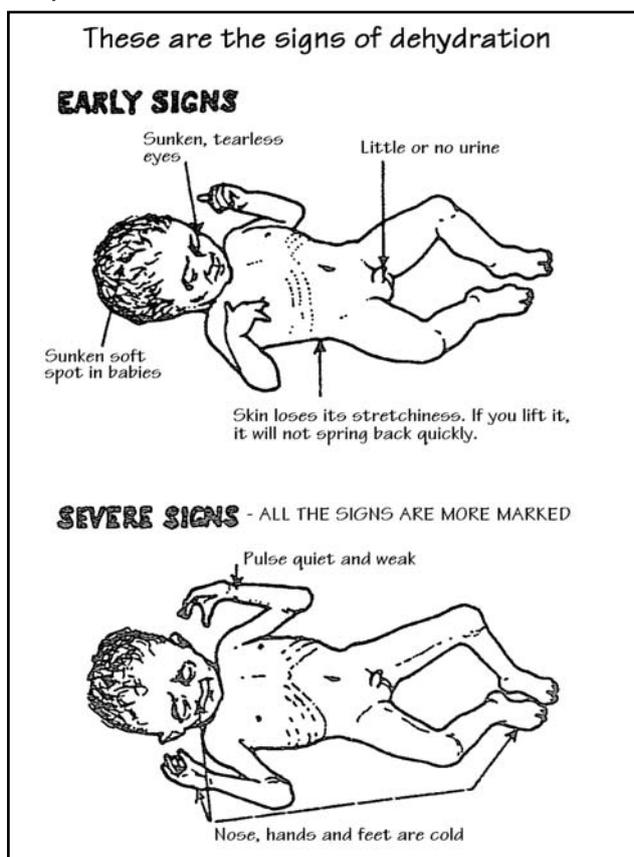
Cholera epidemics are all too common, particularly in India, Africa and Latin America. Cholera is a disease linked to poverty, overcrowded housing and poor sanitation. The reasons why such conditions continue to exist, often alongside wealthy communities, need to be discussed. However, whatever its conditions, every community needs to be mobilised to prevent outbreaks of cholera, and to stop the disease spreading. Specific campaigns have been mounted and children have been mobilised to take part in many countries.

A reader, **The Cholera Crisis**, has been written by Child-to-Child. It tells how children, working from a school health club, help to fight such an epidemic.

dehydration develop within hours. If dehydration is not treated, it may lead to blood circulation problems, as well as damage to the heart, kidneys and brain, and finally to unconsciousness and death.

The germ which causes cholera does not kill directly. People die from dehydration which can be prevented.

If dehydration is treated correctly or prevented, patients will not die and should recover in three to five days. However, prevention is better than cure, so start giving liquids as soon as possible.



## Treating cholera

All cases of diarrhoea need to be treated – often these are not caused by the cholera germ (see Activity Sheet 6.1 **Caring for Children with Diarrhoea**).

In a cholera epidemic, the moment watery diarrhoea begins, extra drinks should be given. If at all possible the sick person should be taken immediately to a health or special treatment centre (continue to give drinks on the way to prevent dehydration developing). At the health centre, health workers will make sure that the person receives fluids for rehydration.

Sometimes it is impossible to take sick people to a health centre. However, their lives may still be saved by giving them plenty of liquids to drink at home. People who have to come home from the treatment centre may still need these drinks.

The best liquid is a special drink, called Oral Rehydration Solution. This drink can be made from packets of oral rehydration salts available from health centres and sometimes shops. But children can easily make the special drink themselves using salt, sugar and clean water, and so help to treat diarrhoea in younger children and babies. Activity Sheet 6.1 describes how to make this drink. Other drinks which may be used are described in the same sheet.

If a child is breastfeeding and will still suck, continue to give it breast milk. This is always the best drink for babies.

Where cholera has to be treated at home, it is important for the patient to keep drinking as much as possible. A normal child of one year old (weight 10 kg) needs one litre of fluid every 24 hours to keep healthy.

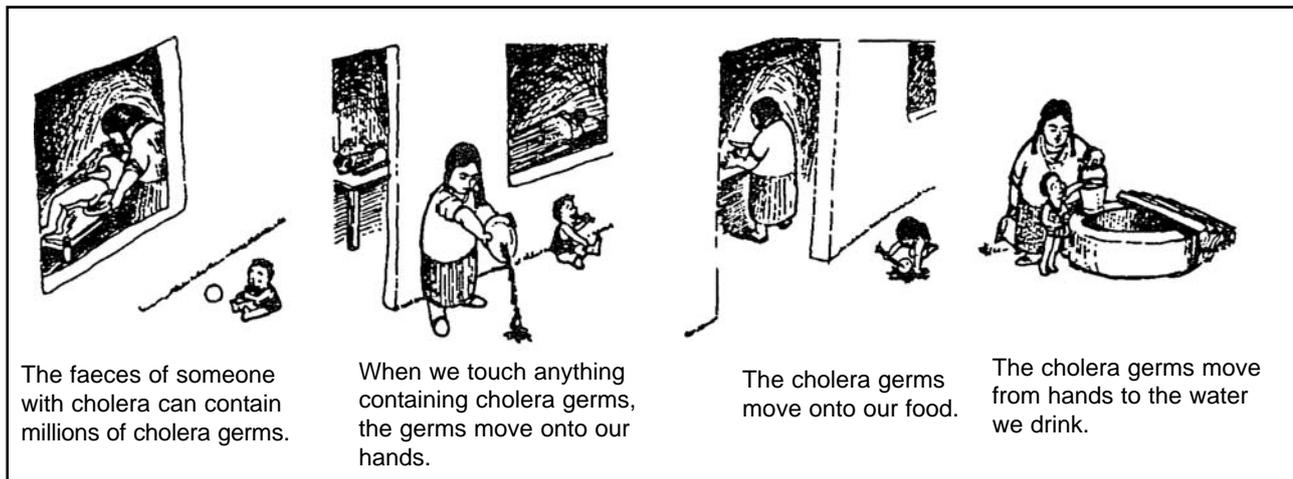
**A child with diarrhoea needs this amount and also needs to replace all the water lost in faeces or vomit.** This is a lot of fluid for a child to take. Give small amounts frequently. Encourage the child to drink. Keep trying. In this way you may save their life.

### Medicines

No medicine can cure cholera. Only replacement of lost fluids can help save the lives of cholera patients. An antibiotic called tetracycline may make the diarrhoea last a shorter time. However, it is the replacement of the lost fluids which saves lives, and not the antibiotic.

## When an epidemic strikes

When cases of cholera occur in a community it is very important for everyone to know how to avoid infection, and what to do if a member of their family falls sick. Schools, local radio and local administration all have a part to play. When people know how to protect themselves against infection, and when they realise that with effective treatment



nearly all cholera cases will recover, they will be less worried.

In case of an epidemic, it may be necessary to open special treatment centres in whatever buildings are available.

## How can we prevent cholera from spreading?

### *In the home*

#### 1 *Keeping ourselves and our homes clean*

Both adults and children need to:

- Wash hands after defecation and always before handling food.
- Pay special attention to keeping latrines clean and to proper disposal of all faeces, especially those of young children.
- Keep drinking water covered and use ladles (see Activity Sheets 6.1, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5).

**Note:** Breastfeeding provides protection for babies against diarrhoea.

#### 2 *Special attention when there is an outbreak of cholera*

When cholera cases have been reported:

- Boil all water for at least 20 minutes.
- Cook food thoroughly. This kills the cholera germ.
- Be especially careful when preparing and storing food. Peel fruit and avoid all raw vegetables.

Cooking utensils can be dried in the sun before using again. Cholera germs survive longer on damp surfaces.

#### 3 *If there is a cholera or diarrhoea case in the home*

Be very careful about washing hands after caring for sick people.

Any soiled bedding or clothes should be soaked in disinfectant before being washed.

### *In the community*

#### 1 *Keeping the community clean*

- Attention to community hygiene and clean safe water will prevent diarrhoea and cholera (see Activity Sheets 3.4 and 3.5).

#### 2 *Education by all available means*

- Every citizen and every school child needs to know how to prevent themselves from getting diarrhoea and cholera. Schools, radio, public health workers and local administrators all have a part to play.

#### 3 *When cholera cases have been reported*

Everyone needs to be informed about their role in preventing the epidemic from spreading. Children cannot do everything, but they should be aware that:

- Public water supplies will require special treatment, e.g. piped water supplies may need to be treated with chlorine.
- Special attention may need to be paid to sewage disposal.

## Immunisation – how useful is it?

- Immunisation (requiring two injections at about ten day intervals) provides protection for about 50 per cent of those immunised. Protection builds only after 3–4 weeks and lasts for 3–6 months.

- Immunisation is very expensive and only partly effective. In the event of an epidemic when resources are limited, it is probably wiser to concentrate these on community hygiene treatment and health education.

## Activities

### With young children

Older children can:

- Take special responsibility for seeing that their younger brothers and sisters wash their hands and that they are properly cleaned after they have passed faeces and before eating.
- Take special care with young children's faeces (see Activity Sheet 3.3).

### With older children

Children who have received the message can:

- Try to pass on health messages to other children, especially those who have not been to school. Often these child-minders are responsible for cooking, collecting water and looking after babies.

### Around the home

Children can:

- Tell adults the messages 'we have learned' in schools or youth groups. Possibly show them pictures drawn at school.
- Show a good example to other people at home in washing hands, covering water pots.

### If there is a case of diarrhoea or, possibly, cholera

Children can:

- Persuade adults to take action quickly.
- Help in making and giving drinks (little and often!).

## In the community

Children can help to prevent cholera by:

### *Keeping the community safe and clean*

Children can play their part in community hygiene projects such as protecting wells.

**However, children should not be exploited and asked to do activities which adults do not want to do, such as digging or building latrines or collecting rubbish.**

### *Finding out about conditions in the community and people's attitudes*

Children can be organised to find out about many useful things, for example:

- What rehydration solutions are used.
- How water is protected and stored.
- Attitudes towards young children's faeces and hygiene.
- Knowledge about cholera and what is normally done if there is a case in the home.

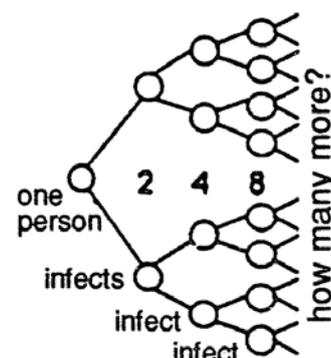
By carrying out these surveys, children will learn useful health knowledge and are more likely to retain this knowledge.

### *Passing on the message about prevention and treatment of cholera and diarrhoea*

**A handshaking game** This game is suitable for children at school or in youth groups. It demonstrates how quickly a disease can spread.

One child covers their hands with chalk or soot and shakes hands with two others. These are now 'infected'.

These two each now shake hands with two more. We now have four more 'infected' people. The four each shake hands with two others. There are now fifteen 'infected' people ... and so on until all the group are infected.



### A water drama

Make up and act a play about a polluted water place (perhaps a village well). What people visit the place? What do they use the water for? What happens if they don't cook food or wash hands?



Children can make plays and puppet shows and perform them:

- at school
- at clinics
- in public places
- on the radio.

Make sure that these plays convey the right messages.

Children can take part in local campaigns to inform and reassure people if there is cholera in the community.

## Follow-up

Check if the children are still washing their hands after using the toilet and before eating.

Find out from the children if they have understood the main messages. Do they know:

- What causes cholera?
- The main symptoms of cholera or diarrhoea?
- Why is it dangerous?
- What to do when cholera strikes?
- That medicines do not help?
- Where to find help, e.g. a health centre?

Test them again in six months.

- Do they still remember the messages correctly?
- Do they know how to prepare rehydration drinks and how often to give them?
- What would they do or say if an adult did not want to give rehydration drinks to children with diarrhoea?
- Have they given rehydration drinks to anyone?
- Have they been able to use their knowledge and skills? Ask the children for examples.

If there has been an outbreak of cholera, find out from the health worker, teacher and children how the children were able to help and whether it made any difference.