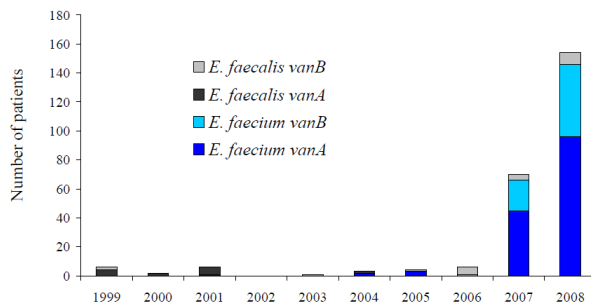


## What is VRE?

VRE are vancomycin-resistant enterococci. Enterococci are bacteria that live in the human bowel and have mutated to prevent the antibiotic vancomycin from working. They are therefore 'resistant' to vancomycin. (A few other antibiotics will still be effective.) *Enterococcus faecium* is the most common species to be resistant to vancomycin in New Zealand.

VRE first appeared overseas and have spread to New Zealand since 1996. The number of people in New Zealand who carry these bacteria is increasing (see the graph below).

Figure 1. Species and van genotype of VRE isolated in New Zealand, 1999-2008



Nelson and Marlborough have one of the lowest regional incidence rates of VRE but it is suspected that many members of the public in our region carry these bacteria in their bowel without being aware of it.

## How did I get this VRE?

We often don't know where people pick up VRE. People most likely to carry VRE are those who have:

- Been very ill – especially those with a weakened immune system
- Been a patient in an intensive care unit
- Had courses of certain antibiotics
- Had treatment with intravenous feeding
- Been treated with catheters
- Spent a long time in hospital
- Spent time in a hospital overseas or in the North Island (especially Auckland or Waikato)
- Been in contact with someone else who is carrying VRE.

## How do you test for VRE?

These bacteria are best detected by taking a sample of your faeces or urine, or taking a swab of your rectum or a wound. The samples are then sent to the laboratory for culture.

Your doctor or nurse can provide you with specimen containers or assist you with taking swabs.

Because VRE is a particular problem in hospitals we sometimes test patients for these bacteria before or on admission to hospital.

## Will this VRE harm me?

VRE are not usually harmful to healthy people but can cause problems for those whose immune systems are weakened by illness, surgery or medication. These bacteria are not more likely to cause infections than non-resistant bacteria but it may be more difficult to choose the right antibiotic to treat them.

If you have these bacteria in your body without any signs of an infection then we call you being 'colonised' or a 'carrier.' In almost all cases you will not experience sickness or symptoms and no treatment is necessary. If you develop illness from these bacteria then antibiotics will be given to treat that illness. No treatment will eliminate VRE completely from your body. Over a period of months to years some people may naturally get rid of the VRE but many people probably carry them for life.

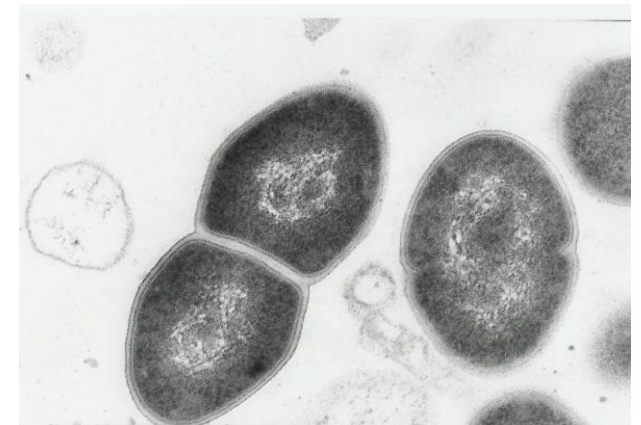


Image courtesy of Instituto de Tecnologia Quimica e Biologica

## Preventing spread in hospital

Patients who are colonised or infected with VRE can spread these to other patients. This can occur through direct contact, poor hygiene, use of shared equipment or via the hands of caregivers.

Steps to prevent the spread of VRE from you to other patients include:

- Giving you your own room whilst you are in the hospital
- Regular thorough hand cleansing by staff
- Staff wearing a gown and gloves when touching you or items in your room.

You can help by regularly cleansing your hands and staying in your room as much as possible. These bacteria will not prevent you being discharged when well enough.



## Will this affect my family, friends or work?

VRE should not harm healthy people who visit you in hospital or who have contact with you at home. This includes pregnant women, children and babies.

While you are in hospital staff will give specific advice to your visitors about hand cleansing each time they leave your room.

At home, normal household cleaning practices are sufficient. Clothing and linen can be washed at the usual temperature and eating utensils can be washed as normal. No restrictions on activities or visitors to your home are necessary. Ask your doctor about work restrictions - these are rarely needed.

### For further information contact

- Your nurse or doctor
- The Infection Control Nurse Specialists, Nelson or Wairau Hospitals
- Phone (03) 546-1800
- Dr Richard Everts  
Infectious Diseases Specialist, Nelson Hospital
- Medlab South. Ph (03) 546-1632

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# VRE

## Information for Patients and Visitors

