

Be careful of what you eat, drink

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I REFER to the recent cholera outbreak in Bintulu, Sarawak. A person may get cholera by drinking water or eating food contaminated with the cholera bacterium.

In an epidemic, the source of the contamination is usually the faeces of an infected person. The disease can spread rapidly in areas with inadequate treatment of sewage and drinking water.

In extreme cases, cholera can be life-threatening; but as a general rule, it can be treated.

In developed countries, because of technologically-sophisticated water and sanitation systems, cholera is not much of a threat.

Cholera is an acute infection of the intestine caused by a comma-shaped bacterium, resulting in di-

arrhoea, vomiting and leg cramps.

The infection ranges from mild or symptomless, to severe. About one in 20 infected people has it at the severe level, characterised by profuse watery diarrhoea, vomiting and leg cramps.

Such cases lead to rapid loss of body fluids, resulting in dehydration and shock. Left alone, it can lead to death.

The cholera bacterium may also live in brackish rivers and coastal waters.

Shellfish eaten raw have been a source of cholera and a few people in the United States have contracted the disease after eating raw or undercooked shellfish from the Gulf of Mexico.

The disease is not likely to spread directly from one person to an-

other; that is to say that it is not contagious and, therefore, casual contact with an infected person will not put one at risk of becoming sick.

However, steps should be taken to eliminate cholera where it has occurred:

DRINK only water that has been boiled or treated with chlorine or iodine;

ICE should not be added to drinks;

EAT only food that have been thoroughly cooked and are still hot, or fruits that you peeled yourself;

AVOID undercooked or raw fish and shellfish;

AVOID transporting seafood to other areas;

MAKE sure all vegetables are

cooked — salads are a definite “no”; and,

HAWKER food and beverages should be avoided.

To it sum up, just boil it, cook it, peel it or forget it.

Oral cholera vaccines are available, which have been shown to be safe, immunogenic and effective.

Those intending to travel to cholera-endemic areas are advised to avail themselves of the vaccine for added protection.

It is incumbent on the government to upgrade the sewage, water and sanitation systems of the state to World Health Organisation standards to prevent cholera outbreaks.

Dr A. Soorian, Seremban, Negri Sembilan.