What Are Vibrio bacteria?

Vibrio are bacteria that occur naturally in estuarine and marine waters worldwide. Vibrio are in the same family of bacteria that cause cholera. There are over 80 species of Vibrio bacteria. *Vibrio vulnificus* (*V. vulnificus*) is one species that can cause infection when swimmers are exposed by open wounds or punctures that occur while swimming, wading or fishing. Not all strains of *V. vulnificus* cause human illness.

V. vulnificus are naturally-occurring bacteria, and pollution is not considered a factor for finding these bacteria in surface waters. The two most significant factors for finding them in surface waters are temperature and salinity (a measure of how much salt is in the water). *V. vulnificus* bacteria are not commonly found in the winter when water temperatures are low, but may be common in the summer and early fall when water temperatures are warm.

Since *V. vulnificus* can be naturally found in warm estuarine and marine waters, people with open wounds may be exposed to *V. vulnificus* through direct contact with the water. When open wounds are exposed to warm seawater with *V. vulnificus*, a skin infection may result; these infections may lead to skin breakdown and ulcers. People with weakened immune systems are at higher risk for serious illness from *V. vulnificus*. Though rare, cases do occur sporadically. Anyone who suspects this type of infection following contact with marine or estuarine waters should see a doctor as soon as possible.

How Can You Prevent *V. vulnificus* Infection?

The only way to prevent infection is to avoid contact with the water. However, the incidence of infection from swimming in Maryland waters is relatively rare.

When water contact cannot be avoided:

- Cover wounds with water proof bandages
- Carry hand sanitizer to swimming areas so that wounds that occur while swimming can be cleansed immediately
- Always shower following swimming in natural waters and wash hands before handling food or eating.