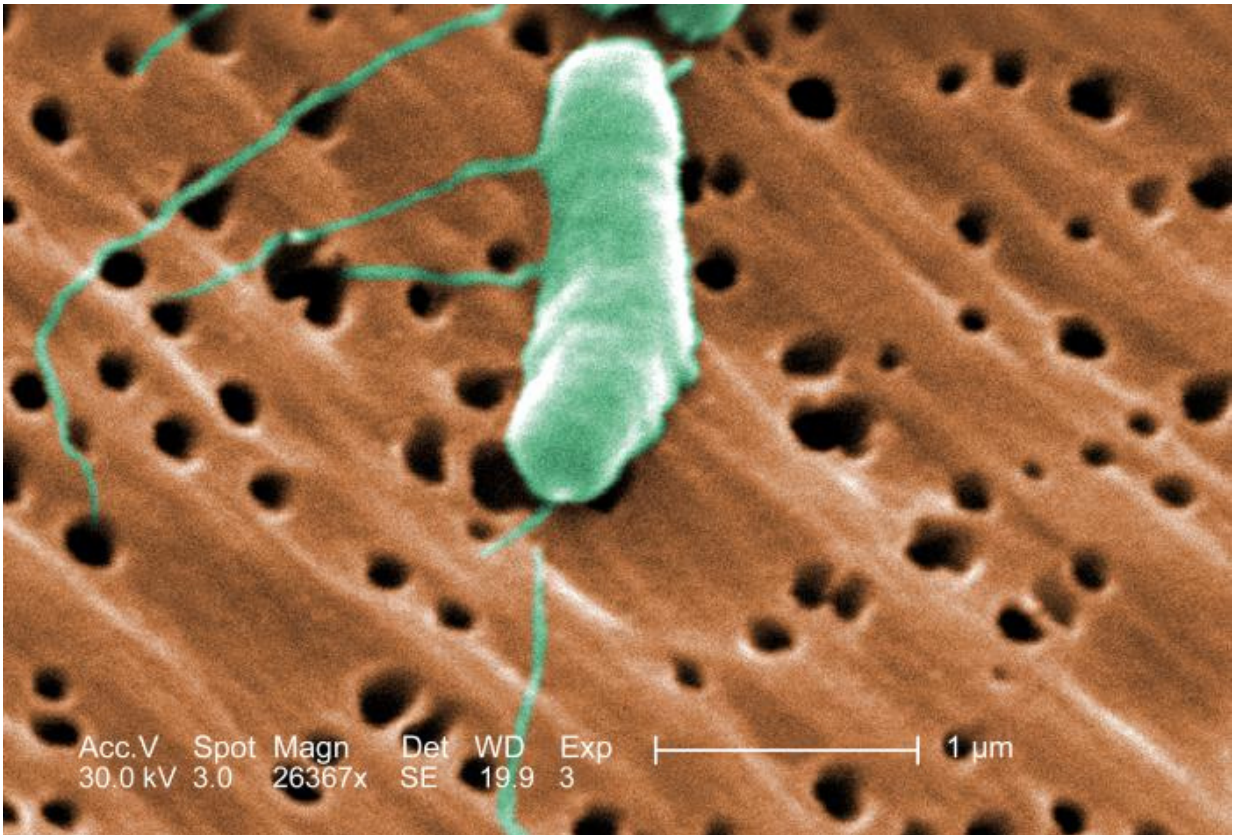


# Protecting yourself from rare flesh-eating bacteria found on Florida's beaches

July 7 2015, by Isabel Gamarra

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*Vibrio vulnificus* bacterium

The Florida Health Department has warned residents and tourists of a rare form of flesh-eating, potentially deadly bacteria that has made its way to Florida beaches. *Vibrio vulnificus* has already infected eight

people this year, killing two.

FIU News sat down with Dr. Consuelo Beck-Sagué, a pediatric infectious disease specialist at FIU's Robert Stempel College of Public Health and Social Work, to give us insight on how people become infected and the potential risks.

## What is *Vibrio vulnificus*?

*V. vulnificus* is a gram-negative bacteria related to the organism that causes cholera, *Vibrio cholerae*. But *V. vulnificus* does not cause cholera. Like *V. cholerae*, it thrives in warm salty water. When the infection is acquired by eating contaminated foods, it typically causes nausea, low-grade fever, vomiting and diarrhea.

When salt water contaminates wounds or scratches in swimmers or waders, the infection is in the skin, causing pain, redness and swelling, blood filled blisters, and skin gangrene, sometimes a "flesh-eating" [bacterial infection](#) picture. Bloodstream infections with shock and severe skin lesions happen most often in people with weakened immune systems or severe [liver disease](#).

## How do people become infected?

Serious infections due to *V. vulnificus* are not common in healthy people with normal immune systems, but they do happen. The most common ways of getting infected are eating raw seafood (oysters, clams, and mussels).

Swimming or wading that exposes cuts or scratches to saltwater can result in [skin infections](#) if the water is contaminated with *V. vulnificus*. It is especially problematic for people with weakened immune systems,

like people with HIV infection or those taking medicines to prevent transplant rejection or for arthritis or other autoimmune diseases, and those with cirrhosis or other serious liver disease.

## **How can people avoid becoming infected?**

Cooking or boiling seafood, and keeping raw seafood and fluids away from food that is ready to eat practically eliminates risk. Rinsing off seafood with warm or hot water is generally not enough to make it safe to eat.

Not swimming or wading when these activities could result in water coming into contact with scratches, wounds or sores greatly reduces the chance of being infected. If you get a scratch or scrape while swimming or wading, wash the water off with clean, fresh [water](#) and hydrogen peroxide as soon as possible.

## **How is it treated?**

Although *V. vulnificus* infections can be fatal, if caught early, they are often treatable with complete recovery. Reddening and pain around a wound or scratch, particularly if the redness seems to be growing or worsening rapidly, or is associated with blistering should alert patients to seek care immediately.

People should seek medical assistance promptly if they have symptoms such as mild vomiting and diarrhea, which can usually be treated with oral or intravenous fluids to prevent dehydration. Severe diarrhea may and wound and bloodstream infection almost always require antibiotics. Ceftazidime or another "third-generation" cephalosporin, along with doxycycline, is the best combination for treating *V. vulnificus* infections that need treatment.

Provided by Florida International University

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