

ESBL patient information leaflet

What are ESBLs?

ESBLs are bugs (bacteria) that live in the bowel. ESBL is short for extended-spectrum beta-lactamase producer, but we will use only the short name – ESBL – in this leaflet.

ESBLs are resistant to many antibiotics. This means they are harder to kill with antibiotics than other common bugs that live in the bowel. Sometimes, these bugs that are resistant to antibiotics are called 'superbugs'. ESBLs are a lot like another superbug called CPE (Carbapenemase Producing Enterobacterales). The difference is that CPE is even more resistant to antibiotics than ESBLs.

For most people most of the time, ESBLs live harmlessly in the bowel and do not cause infection. Sometimes, though, they can get into the bladder and cause bladder infection (cystitis) or kidney infection (pyelonephritis) even in people who are generally in good health.

ESBLs can cause very serious infection in some patients – for example, when they need intensive care or when they're having chemotherapy. If you get an ESBL infection, it can be treated with special antibiotics, but some common antibiotics will not work. If you get a serious infection with an ESBL, doctors need to know as soon as possible so that you get the right antibiotics as soon as possible.

How did I get an ESBL?

ESBLs are much more common than they were 20 years ago. Because they are now so common, there is usually no way of telling where you picked it up. You might have had it in your bowel for months or even years before you had a test that showed you had an ESBL. This is because, in most people, an ESBL bug can live harmlessly in the bowel for a long time.

ESBLs are common in some animals and some kinds of raw meat. ESBLs are even more common in some other countries. Because of this, people sometimes get an ESBL while on holiday, working abroad or getting healthcare in other countries.

Twenty years ago, ESBLs were rare except in people who spent a lot of time in hospital. You could still pick up an ESBL in hospitals, but now ESBLs are also common in nursing homes, in people at home and in the community.

What are the symptoms of an ESBL bug?

As long as the ESBL bug stays in your bowel, it does not cause an illness. It does not cause diarrhoea or stomach pains. However, if the ESBL bug gets into the bladder, kidney or blood, it can cause infection. When this happens the person will often get a temperature, feel pain and start

shivering that feels the same as if they had any other infection. The only difference is that, if you need treatment, many of the ordinary antibiotics do not work. Your doctor will have to give you special antibiotics to treat the ESBL infection.

How long will I have ESBL?

The ESBL bug can live in your bowel for months or even years. If you do not have to take antibiotics for a long time, you increase the chance that it will fade away. If you need to take antibiotics often, it will take ESBL longer to clear.

How can I reduce the spread of ESBLs?

The best way to stop spread of all bugs and viruses is to keep the toilet rim, flush handle and seat clean, and to clean your hands thoroughly after going to the toilet, before eating and after touching raw meat.

If you go to hospital, you will notice that the staff will be especially careful to clean their hands after they have been caring for you. Sometimes they will wear aprons and gloves. Also, you may be given a single room if it's possible. These steps are taken to help reduce the spread of ESBL in hospital. It is important to tell a member of staff if you know you have an ESBL.

What happens when I go home?

The risk is very small that ESBLs will do major harm to people in fairly good general health. You do not need to do anything different from anyone else as you go about your normal life at home and when you're out and about. Clothes, bed linen and dishes can be washed as usual. Just as for everybody else, though, we recommend that you are careful about cleaning your hands thoroughly. Everyone should clean their hands before eating or preparing food. Clean hands protect you and others from the spread of most bugs, not just ESBLs.

Following good hand hygiene practice all the time helps to prevent the spread of bacteria and viruses. When you use the toilet, it is really important that you leave the toilet clean and in the condition that you would like to find it.

Further information

Please do not hesitate to ask the healthcare staff caring for you if you have any questions, or if you require more information about ESBLs. Information on hand hygiene, infection control and managing superbugs at home is available on www.hse.ie/hcai or on www.hpsc.ie