# Cholera cases linked to contaminated Ethiopian holy water imported to UK and Germany



Concerns have been raised among British health officials following the hospitalisation of several people in the UK due to cholera linked to contaminated 'holy water' imported from Ethiopia. The water, sourced from a sacred well known as Bermel Giorgis near Ethiopia’s northwestern border with Sudan, was brought into the UK earlier this year and found to carry a drug-resistant strain of the Vibrio cholerae bacterium.

The Bermel Giorgis well holds significant religious importance, believed by many to possess healing properties, including the ability to cure illness and exorcise demons. However, researchers from the UK Health Security Agency (UKHSA) have reported that four individuals who returned to the UK between January and mid-February and later consumed the water required hospital treatment for cholera. Among these patients, one had to be admitted to an intensive care unit. The affected individuals ranged in age from their 20s to their 70s.

Two of those infected had recently travelled to the Amhara region in Ethiopia, where the well is located, with one person specifically mentioning a nine-day visit to Bermel Giorgis. A third patient in the UK, who had not travelled to Ethiopia, reported drinking the holy water imported by the fourth patient, who also became ill after consuming it within the UK.

The outbreak in East Africa has been ongoing since 2022, with Ethiopia reporting nearly 60,000 cases and 726 deaths attributed to cholera to date. The particular strain identified in these UK cases was found to be multidrug-resistant and has been previously associated with outbreaks in Kenya and other parts of Sub-Saharan, Eastern, and Middle Africa.

In addition to the UK cases, similar infections have been reported in Germany. German officials identified three adults diagnosed with the same strain of cholera. Two of these individuals had travelled to Ethiopia in January and acquired small bottles of water from the Bermel Giorgis well, which they consumed upon returning home. The third person contracted the infection after being splashed with water from the holy well, including on the face and lips, possibly ingesting some of the contaminated water. All three developed symptoms of diarrhoea and vomiting in early February, necessitating hospitalisation, with one patient requiring intensive care.

Samples from all seven patients in both the UK and Germany underwent extensive testing in specialised British and German laboratories. Investigations confirmed that the holy water was heavily contaminated and that the cholera bacteria remained viable during air travel and subsequent storage in Europe, according to a report published in the journal Eurosurveillance.

The researchers highlighted that while preventive efforts, such as community education and training regarding the risks associated with consuming holy water, have been initiated in the region during 2024, the spread of cases to Europe linked to the ongoing cholera outbreak in Africa remains unusual. They reported that following the illness of the four UK patients, the remaining imported holy water was disposed of.

Medical professionals treating patients of Ethiopian heritage exhibiting severe diarrhoea symptoms are being encouraged to inquire about recent consumption of holy water as part of diagnostic assessments.

Cholera is an intestinal infection caused by ingesting food or water contaminated with Vibrio cholerae bacteria. It typically has a short incubation period ranging from less than a day up to five days. The illness produces a powerful enterotoxin that leads to profuse, painless, watery diarrhoea, which can quickly result in severe dehydration and potentially death without prompt treatment. Vomiting is also a common symptom.

While once notorious for causing devastating outbreaks in the 19th century, cholera is now rare in the UK due to improvements in sanitation and widespread access to safe drinking water. It is important to note that cholera does not spread directly from person to person through casual contact such as coughing or sneezing, but rather through the ingestion of contaminated water or food, or contact with contaminated hands. Preventative measures include thorough handwashing with soap and ensuring that drinking water has been boiled or otherwise treated.

The Daily Mail is reporting on this developing health concern, highlighting the link between traditional practices of holy water consumption and the ongoing cholera outbreak in East Africa that has now seen cases identified in Europe.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## References

* <https://www.ndtv.com/world-news/british-nationals-contract-cholera-after-drinking-holy-water-from-ethiopian-pilgrimage-site-8178068> - This URL confirms the outbreak of drug-resistant cholera linked to holy water from a pilgrimage site in Ethiopia among British nationals and highlights the significant public health challenge due to poor water access in Ethiopia.
* <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC11987497/> - This source details the cases of cholera in Germany and the UK linked to holy water from Ethiopia, including the identification of a multidrug-resistant strain of Vibrio cholerae.
* <https://www.news-medical.net/news/20250410/Cholera-cases-in-Europe-linked-to-holy-water-imported-from-Ethiopia.aspx> - This article provides information on the cholera cases in Europe linked to holy water from Ethiopia, emphasizing the role of the Bermel Giorgis holy well as a contamination source and highlighting the health risks associated with consuming untreated holy water.
* <https://bioengineer.org/european-patients-infected-with-multi-drug-resistant-cholera-tied-to-contaminated-holy-water-from-ethiopia/> - This article addresses the multidrug-resistant nature of the cholera strain affecting European patients and explains how it connects to broader global health challenges and the importance of effective public health monitoring.
* <https://www.fitfortravel.nhs.uk/news/newsdetail.aspx?id=24870> - This source provides a broader overview of cholera outbreaks across Africa, including Ethiopia's ongoing situation, and offers advice for travelers on precautions to take during outbreaks.