

# Giardiasis

## What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasite called *Giardia lamblia*. It is a fairly common cause of diarrheal illness. Cases may occur by themselves or in clusters.

## Who gets giardiasis?

Anyone can get giardiasis, but it tends to be more common in people in hospitals and long term care settings, children and staff in day care centers, travelers to foreign countries, individuals who drink improperly treated surface waters, such as campers or travelers to foreign countries, and men who have sex with men.

## How is this parasite spread?

*Giardia* are found worldwide in people, domestic animals and wildlife. The parasite has a "fecal-oral" route of transmission, meaning that it is taken in through the mouth and contagious parasites are passed in the poop. Eating food or drinking water that has been polluted by the parasite are the most common methods of becoming infected. In day care centers and some institutional settings where handwashing practices are poor, *giardia* may be transmitted person to person.

## What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

People exposed to *giardia* may develop symptoms from 5 to 25 days after contact, but usually within 10 days. Not everyone who is infected develops symptoms, but those who do may experience mild to severe diarrhea. Fever is rarely present. Occasionally, a person will have chronic diarrhea over several weeks or months, leading to significant weight loss.

Any person, whether showing symptoms or not, who is infected is considered capable of transmitting the parasite in their poop. Infected persons will get rid of the parasite in their poop anywhere from a few weeks to a few months.

## Can giardiasis be treated?

Yes. Persons showing symptoms may be prescribed antibiotics such as metronidazole or furazolidone. However, the doctor might not prescribe antibiotic treatment for a person with an infection not showing symptoms. Although the drugs generally are well tolerated, they have been connected with a variety of side effects. Consequently, the decision of whether to treat a person without symptoms will depend on individual situations. Some people recover without treatment.

The reappearance of symptoms, 10 to 12 days after therapy has been completed, suggests the person has been reinfected with giardia, whereas symptom recurrence closer to the time of stopping therapy suggests treatment failure. While a reinfection can be treated with the same antibiotic as previously used, a treatment failure requires switching to another antibiotic.

## **Should an infected person be excluded from work, day care or school?**

People with diarrhea who are unable to control their bowel habits, such as infants and young children, may need to be excluded from settings such as day care or group activities where they may present a risk to others. After they have been treated and have recovered, they can return. Individuals who are not in high-risk settings can return to their routine activities when they have recovered and their bowel movements are again solid.

## **What can a person do to prevent the spread of giardiasis?**

The most important preventive measures are avoidance of fecally contaminated water or food, and the proper disposal of human or animal waste products.

Campers and travelers to foreign countries can disinfect small amounts of water by boiling it for at least 10 minutes (longer at higher altitudes). If the water cannot be boiled then commercially available treatment kits or filters, sold at camping supply stores, should be used.

In day care centers or other places where diaper changing occurs, it is important to clean the diapering area between children and to properly wash one's hands between children even if disposable gloves were worn. This is because even children showing no symptoms may have giardia in their poop. The changing area should be away from food preparation and feeding areas. The diaper changing surface should be covered with a smooth, moisture-resistant, cleanable cover. After use, the changing surface should be cleaned with a detergent spray or soap and water and allowed to dry. Dirty diapers should be properly disposed of in a leak proof container. Disposable gloves can be used when changing diapers, but they must be replaced between children.

## **There is a child with giardiasis in my child's day care center. What actions will the Health Department take?**

In general, the Health Department does not investigate cases of giardiasis. The day care center staff will receive guidance and advice from the Health Department and children with diarrhea will be excluded until the diarrhea has resolved. Testing of other children in the center is not done. The Health Department encourages the day care center staff to notify all parents that there has been a case of giardiasis in the center

and as to what are the symptoms. Also, the Health Department encourages that more attention be paid to hand washing, such as washing all the children's hands upon arrival for the day, before eating, and after using the bathroom.