



Giardiasis

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is an intestinal infection that is spread by eating food contaminated by stool, drinking contaminated water or through direct contact with the organism that causes the disease, *Giardia lamblia*. Giardiasis is found throughout the world and is a common cause of traveler's diarrhea.

How is giardiasis spread?

Children can easily pass on giardiasis by touching contaminated toys, changing tables, utensils or their own feces and then touching other people or food. For this reason, infection spreads quickly through child care centers or institutions for the developmentally disabled. Unfiltered streams that feed into lakes may be contaminated by human or animal waste are a common source of infection. Outbreaks can occur among campers and hikers who drink untreated water from mountain streams. Eating raw or undercooked food is another source of contamination. Outbreaks from tainted city water are rare. Outbreaks can also occur from contaminated water play tables, wading pools, swimming pools and hot tubs.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Some infected people exhibit no symptoms. When present, symptoms include chronic or acute, watery diarrhea. The chronic diarrhea can last for two to six weeks, or longer. Typically, most cases of acute diarrhea last one to three days and is self-limited. Because the infection interferes with the body's ability to absorb fats from the intestinal tract, the stool is filled with fat. Other symptoms include:

- Diarrhea that comes on suddenly and may be watery
- A vague feeling of discomfort
- Foul-smelling and fatty stools
- Abdominal cramps, gas and bloating
- Nausea or vomiting
- Weight loss

How is giardiasis diagnosed?

The condition can be diagnosed by examining three stool samples for the presence of the parasites.

How is giardiasis treated?

Infected children and adults with symptoms should be treated. Antibiotics reduce symptoms and prevent the spread of infection. It is especially important for young children and pregnant women to get enough fluids in order to prevent dehydration. Avoid dairy (milk) products for at least a month after treatment because giardiasis infection causes lactose deficiency.

How is giardiasis prevented?

The best way to avoid giardiasis is to avoid drinking untreated surface water, especially from mountain streams. The condition also can be minimized by practicing the following preventive measures:

- Thoroughly washing hands after use of the toilet and before handling food.
- Maintaining good personal cleanliness.
- Boiling or heating to 158°C for at a minimum of ten minutes.
- Properly disposing of fecal material and disinfecting diaper-changing surfaces.
- Avoiding wading pools.

- Wash children's hands before and after using water play tables and Playdough.
- Practicing sanitary precautions when traveling outside the country.

If you have giardiasis, you should not go swimming for at least two weeks after the diarrhea stops.

School/Child Care Attendance

Children with severe diarrhea (and others who are unable to control their bowel habits) should be kept at home until the stool returns to normal. If an outbreak occurs in a child care center, the director should notify the child health consultant at the local health department. Follow up testing may be required to confirm that the person is no longer contagious. People not in high-risk settings can return to their routine activities after diarrhea is gone.

For more information contact Guilford County Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Public Health at (336) 641-7777 or www.myguilford.com