

# GIARDIASIS

## What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis (GEE-are-DYE-uh-sis) is a diarrheal illness caused by *Giardia lamblia*, a microscopic parasite that lives in people and animals. Infected people and animals pass *Giardia* cysts in their stool. These cysts can survive in the environment in water and food and on surfaces and objects.

## What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Symptoms include diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea, bloating, gas, fatigue, weight loss, and dehydration. Symptoms generally begin one to two weeks after being infected. In otherwise healthy persons, symptoms usually last two to six weeks, but occasionally last longer. Some infected people do not develop any symptoms.

## Who is at risk of getting giardiasis?

Persons at increased risk for giardiasis include children and staff in day care centers; international travelers; hikers, campers, swimmers, and others who drink or accidentally swallow water from contaminated sources. Persons who have unprotected anal sex are also at increased risk of contracting giardiasis.

## How is giardiasis spread?

*Giardia* may be found in soil, food, water, or on surfaces that have been contaminated with feces from infected people or animals. People become infected after accidentally swallowing *Giardia* cysts. For example, hikers, backpackers, and campers sometimes get giardiasis by drinking from lakes, streams, and ponds that have been contaminated by animals. Giardiasis can also be spread from person-to-person, such as in day care centers that care for children in diapers.

## How is giardiasis diagnosed?

Giardiasis is usually diagnosed by using a microscope to identify *Giardia* cysts in a stool sample. Other tests that detect *Giardia* antigen are also available. Depending on the type of test that is conducted, several stool specimens may need to be submitted over several days.

## How is giardiasis treated?

Some people recover without treatment, but persistent infections may require antibiotics. There are several prescription drugs available to treat *Giardia*. People with severe diarrhea should drink plenty of fluids, especially young children and pregnant women who may be more susceptible to dehydration.

## **How common is giardiasis?**

*Giardia* is found throughout the United States and the world. In the United States, *Giardia* is one of the most common causes of waterborne diseases in people. Outbreaks have been associated with contaminated municipal and recreational waters, day care centers, and among men who have sex with men. In California, 2,000 to 4,000 cases of giardiasis are reported each year; however, it is likely that there are many more cases each year that go undiagnosed.

## **How can giardiasis be prevented?**

- Wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet, changing diapers, and before eating or preparing food.
- Wash and/or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating. Avoid eating uncooked foods when traveling in developing countries.
- Avoid swallowing recreational water (swimming pools, hot tubs, etc.).
- Avoid drinking untreated water from shallow wells, lakes, streams, and ponds. If unable to avoid drinking or using water that might be contaminated, purify water by boiling, filtration, or iodine treatments.
- Carefully dispose of disposable diaper and sewage wastes so as not to contaminate surface or groundwater.
- Avoid fecal exposure during sex.
- Anyone with giardiasis should avoid swimming pools. *Giardia* cysts are resistant to chlorine levels used in swimming pools and are passed in the stools of infected people for several weeks, even after they no longer have symptoms.
- Day care centers should teach the importance of handwashing to children and staff.

## **Should people with giardiasis be excluded from work or school?**

People with diarrhea need to be excluded from group settings where they may present a risk to others such as daycare centers and schools. Some health departments may require food handlers and childcare workers who have giardiasis to test negative for *Giardia* before returning to work. People who are not in high-risk settings may return to their routine activities when they have recovered, however, they should carefully wash their hands after using the toilet.

## **Where can I get more information about giardiasis?**

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has a website with information at: <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/giardiasis/default.htm>

The United States Environmental Protection Agency has a website with information at: <http://www.epa.gov/waterscience/humanhealth/microbial/giardiafs.pdf>