

## Amebiasis (am-e-bi-a-sis)

### What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a very small parasite, called *Entamoeba histolytica* (*ent-a-ME-ba his-to-LI-ti-ka*). Amebiasis occurs worldwide. Although, anyone can be infected with this illness, it is most common in people who live in developing countries that have poor sanitary conditions. It is also found in people who have traveled to developing countries and in people who live in institutions with poor sanitation.

### How amebiasis is spread?

The parasite lives only in humans; therefore the parasite is excreted in human stools. Infections happen after eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated by feces that contain the parasites. Water can be contaminated with human wastes where sewage disposal practices are poor. Another source of the parasite could be raw vegetables which can be contaminated if they are fertilized with human waste. Although, this is not permitted in Canada, it is a practice still followed in other parts of the world. Travelers are at a higher risk of acquiring this infection.

### What are the symptoms?

Symptoms may appear from a few days to a few months after exposure to the parasite but usually within two to four weeks. People exposed to this parasite may experience mild or severe symptoms or no symptoms at all. The mild form of amebiasis includes nausea, diarrhea, weight loss, abdominal tenderness and occasional fever.

It is recommended to treat amebiasis. Treatment must be prescribed by a physician. The illness lasts about three weeks with medication, but can last for a long time if untreated. Some people with amebiasis may carry the parasite for weeks to years, often without symptoms.

### How to prevent amebiasis infection?

- Thorough hand washing is the best prevention. Make sure hands are properly washed after using the washroom, handling diapers, and before and after preparing or serving food.
- Clean and sanitize diaper changing area after each use.
- Drink water from a safe supply. When traveling, boil water for at least one minute if you are unsure of the supply or use bottled water. Remember that ice cubes made from contaminated water may also carry the parasite.
- Avoid eating raw shell fish harvested from unknown sources.
- Peel or wash all fruits and vegetables with safe water before eating.
- If ill with diarrhea, avoid preparing or handling food.