

Giardiasis (GEE-are-DYE-uh-sis)

What is giardiasis?

Giardia lamblia is a parasite that causes diarrhea in humans. It lives in the intestines of people and animals and is passed through the stool. The parasite is protected by an outer shell (cyst) allowing it to survive outside the body in the environment for long periods of time. Giardiasis occurs worldwide and children are typically infected more often than adults.

How is giardiasis spread?

Giardia lamblia lives in the intestine of infected humans or animals (beavers, muskrats, pets and livestock) and may be found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated with feces from an infected individual. *Giardia* can be spread from person-to-person. You can become infected if you swallow the *Giardia* cysts that have been passed in the feces of an infected person or animal.

For example:

- Swallowing untreated surface water from lakes, rivers, springs, ponds or streams that could be contaminated with sewage or feces from humans or animals.
- Swallowing recreational water. Sometimes recreational waters such as swimming pools, hot tubs and jacuzzis can be contaminated.
- Eating contaminated foods.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms include diarrhea, loose, mucousy pale greasy stool, stomach cramps, bloating, severe gas, weight loss, fatigue and dehydration. One in every 25 people carries *Giardia* without having any symptoms. Symptoms usually last two—six weeks, but occasionally become chronic.

The incubation period is seven to 10 days, but can range from three to 25 days or longer. Infection is frequently self-limited and anti-parasitic treatment is often prescribed. There is no immunity from re-infection. Typically there are no long-term effects, however in severe cases, damage to intestinal cells may occur.

How to prevent giardiasis infection?

- Thorough hand washing is the best prevention. Make sure hands are properly washed with soap and water after using the toilet or changing diapers, after handling pets or livestock and before preparing any food.
- Thoroughly wash, with uncontaminated water, all vegetables and fruits you plan to eat raw.
- Do not drink water directly from rivers, creeks and lakes, or whenever you are uncertain whether the water has been properly treated (such as foreign travel).
- When travelling, camping or hiking, or when a “boil water” advisory has been issued, bring the water to a full boil for one minute. This water should be used for drinking, brushing teeth, rinsing dentures or contact lenses, making ice cubes, washing uncooked fruits and vegetables and recipes requiring water (such as baby formula). Dishes should be washed with water that has been boiled.
- Avoid sex that involves anal contact.