

GIARDIASIS

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a tiny parasite called *Giardia lamblia*. It is a commonly reported cause of diarrheal illness that may occur as an individual case or as an outbreak.

Anyone can get infected with giardiasis, but it is more common in children, particularly where sanitation is poor. Infection rates are also higher in travellers, men who have sex with men, people living in institutional settings and people with weakened immune systems.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Many people with giardiasis do not experience any symptoms. Those who become ill may have:

- Mild to severe diarrhea, with loose, mucousy pale greasy stools
- Abdominal cramps
- Weight loss
- Bloating
- Fatigue
- Poor absorption of fats by the body

Symptoms may appear from three to 25 days after exposure to the parasite, but usually within seven to 10 days. People with weakened immune systems may experience longer and serious symptoms.

How does giardiasis spread?

Infected humans or animals (beavers, muskrats, pets, nonhuman primates and livestock) carry the *Giardia* parasite in their intestines and pass it in their feces, even if they do not have symptoms of infection.

Giardia may be found in soil, food, water or any other surface that was contaminated with feces from infected humans or animals. The parasite is protected by an outer shell (cyst) that allows it to survive outside the body for long periods of time.

Individuals can become infected by swallowing something that contains *Giardia* cysts. Swallowing cysts can result in infection and can happen in the following ways:

- Swallowing recreational water contaminated with *Giardia* (e.g., swimming pools, hot tubs, jacuzzis, fountains, lakes, rivers, springs, ponds or streams) that can be contaminated with sewage or feces from humans or animals
- Eating uncooked food that contains *Giardia*
- Accidentally swallowing *Giardia* picked up from surfaces (such as bathroom fixtures, changing tables, diaper pails or toys) soiled by feces from an infected person. This may occur in childcare centres or in settings with poor handwashing practices

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- Hand-to-mouth transfer of cysts from the feces of infected persons or through oral-anal sexual contact
- Contact with fecal material from infected animals
- Travelling to countries where giardiasis is common

An infected person can carry *Giardia* from weeks to months and can infect others during this time.

How is giardiasis treated?

Antiparasitic treatment is available in consultation with a health care provider, although people can usually recover without treatment.

How can giardiasis be prevented?

- Practice good hand hygiene. Wash hands frequently for at least 15 seconds with soap and water, using the six-step method, especially:
 - After using the washroom
 - After changing diapers
 - Before preparing or eating food
 - After handling animals or their toys, leashes or feces
 - After gardening, even if wearing gloves
- Do not prepare food or handle water for others if you have diarrhea
- Dispose of feces in a sanitary manner
- Avoid consuming improperly treated water (e.g., from streams, lakes, swimming pools, wading pools)

Giardia is resistant to routine chlorination concentrations and will require a combination of treatments to remove cysts from water sources.
- Drink water from a safe supply. If you are unsure of the supply, drink bottled water or boil water to a rolling boil for one minute or using appropriate filtration. Remember that ice cubes made from contaminated water may also carry the parasite

People with diarrhea should be excluded from settings where they may spread the illness (e.g., food handlers, patient care workers, children or staff attending childcare centres) until they are diarrhea-free for 24 hours. Household or sexual contacts of cases should be tested and, if infected, treated.