



August 2011

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. The highest number of cases appears in late summer and fall.

Anyone can get giardiasis, but it tends to occur more often in children, particularly where sanitation is poor. Rates of more than 50 per cent have occurred in child care centres where there are children who are not yet toilet trained. Infection rates are also higher among travellers, men who have sex with men, people living in institutional settings and people with weakened immune systems.

Symptoms of Giardiasis

Many people with giardiasis do not experience any symptoms. Those who do become ill may have mild to severe diarrhea, with loose, mucousy pale greasy stools, increased gas, abdominal cramps, weight loss and bloating. Watery diarrhea may cycle with soft stools and constipation. Fever is rarely present.

The symptoms may appear from three to 25 days after exposure to the parasite, but usually within seven to 10 days. Symptoms typically last from two to six weeks, but occasionally become chronic.

How Giardiasis Spreads

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

Giardia may be found in soil, food, water, or any other surfaces that have been contaminated with the 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 (i.e., for two months in surface water).

You can become infected if you swallow something that contains *Giardia* cysts. Swallowing 10 to 25 cysts can result in infection. This can happen in the following ways:

- Swallowing recreational water contaminated with *Giardia*. Recreational water includes water in 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 child care centres or in settings where handwashing practices are poor.

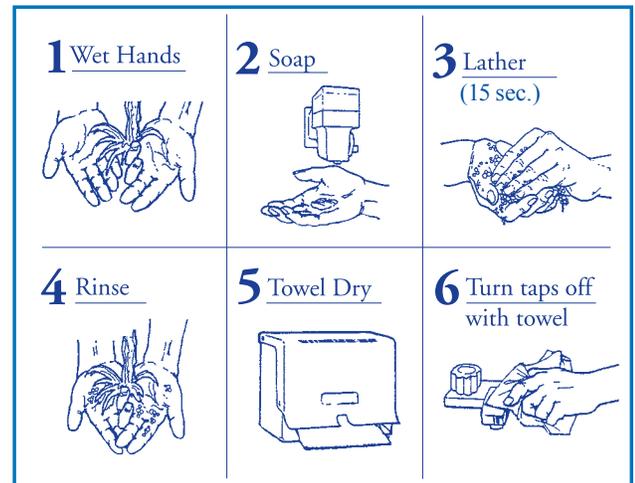
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- Hand-to-mouth transfer of cysts from the feces of infected persons or through oral-anal sexual contact.
- Contact with fecal material from infected animals.
- Travelling to countries where giardiasis is common.

An infected person can carry *Giardia* from a few weeks to months and can infect others during this time. Treatment with specific antibiotics may shorten the carrier stage.

Preventing Giardiasis

- Practise good hand hygiene. Wash hands frequently for at least 15 seconds using soap and water and 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).
- Emergency water supplies should be boiled for five minutes. Chemical treatment is less reliable and consists of placing two to four drops of household bleach in a litre of water, and letting it stand for 20 minutes before use.
- 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 child care centres), until they are diarrhea-free for 24 hours. Household or sexual contacts of cases should be tested and, if infected, treated.



Treating Giardiasis

Antiparasitic treatment is available, although people can usually recover without treatment.

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