

Giardiasis

Your questions answered

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is a diarrheal disease caused by the microscopic parasite, Giardia. A parasite is an organism that feeds off of another to survive. Once a person or animal (for example, cats, dogs, cattle, deer and beavers) has been infected with Giardia, the parasite lives in the intestines and is passed in feces (poop). Once outside the body, Giardia can sometimes survive for weeks or months. Giardia can be found within every region of the U.S. and around the world.

How do you get giardiasis and how is it spread?

Giardiasis can be spread by:

- By putting something in your mouth or accidentally swallowing something that has come into contact with the feces of a person or animal infected with Giardia.
- Drinking water or using ice made from water sources where Giardia may live (for example, untreated or improperly treated water from lakes, streams, or wells)
- Swallowing water while swimming or playing in water where Giardia may live, especially in lakes, rivers, springs, ponds and streams
- Eating uncooked food that contains Giardia organisms
- Having contact with someone who is ill with giardiasis
- Traveling to countries where giardiasis is common
- Anything that comes into contact with feces from infected humans or animals can become contaminated with the Giardia parasite. People become infected when they swallow the parasite. It is not possible to become infected through contact with blood.

What are the symptoms?

Giardia infection can cause a variety of intestinal symptoms, which include:

- Diarrhea
- Gas or flatulence
- Greasy stool that can float
- Stomach or abdominal cramps
- Upset stomach or nausea
- Dehydration

These symptoms may also lead to weight loss. Some people with Giardia infection have no symptoms at all. Symptoms of giardiasis normally begin one to three weeks after becoming infected.

What Can **YOU** Do?

How long do symptoms last?

In otherwise healthy people, symptoms of giardiasis may last two to six weeks. Occasionally, symptoms last longer. Medications can help decrease the amount of time symptoms last.

Who is most at risk of getting giardiasis?

Though giardiasis is commonly thought of as a camping or backpacking-related disease and is sometimes called “Beaver Fever,” anyone can get giardiasis. People more likely to become infected include:

- Children in child care settings, especially diaper-aged children
- Close contacts (for example, people living in the same household) or people who care for those sick with giardiasis
- People who drink water or use ice made from places where *Giardia* may live (for example, untreated or improperly treated water from lakes, streams, or wells)
- Backpackers, hikers, and campers who drink unsafe water or who do not practice good hygiene (for example, proper handwashing)
- People who swallow water while swimming and playing in recreational water where *Giardia* may live, especially in lakes, rivers, springs, ponds and streams
- International travelers
- People exposed to human feces through sexual contact.

What should I do if I think I may have giardiasis?

Contact your health care provider. Your provider will ask you to submit stool samples to see if you are infected. Because testing for giardiasis can be difficult, you may be asked to submit several stool specimens collected over several days.

What is the treatment for giardiasis?

Many prescription drugs are available to treat giardiasis. Although the *Giardia* parasite can infect all people, infants and pregnant women may be more likely to experience dehydration from the diarrhea caused by giardiasis. To prevent dehydration, infants and pregnant women should drink a lot of fluids while ill. Dehydration can be life threatening for infants, so it is especially important that parents talk to their health care providers about treatment options for their infants.

What can I do to prevent and control giardiasis?

To prevent and control infection with the *Giardia* parasite, it is important to:

- Practice good hygiene
- Avoid water (drinking or recreational) that may be contaminated
- Avoid eating food that may be contaminated
- Prevent contact and contamination with feces during sex.

For more information on giardiasis, call the Lawrence-Douglas County Health Department at **(785) 843-0721** or visit us on the web at: www.ldchealth.org