

Giardiasis - Factsheet

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is a stomach or intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasite (germ) called *Giardia duodenalis*.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis infection?

People infected with Giardiasis may have:

- mild or severe diarrhea, typically 2-5 loose stools a day
- gas
- foul smelling greasy stools that float
- stomach cramps or pain
- upset stomach/nausea
- fever is rarely present
- dehydration and fatigue
- These symptoms may appear from 1 to 3 weeks after exposure, but usually within 10 days. Symptoms typically resolve in 2-6 weeks. Some infected persons may have chronic diarrhea over several weeks or months resulting in significant weight loss while in some instances, other infected persons will have no symptoms at all (generally seen in children).

Rare symptoms include:

- itchy skin
- hives
- swelling of the eyes
- swelling of the joints

The Centers for Disease Control and prevention (CDC) notes that, “Occasionally, people with giardiasis will have long-term complications such as reactive arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, and recurring diarrhea that can last for years. Among children in particular, severe giardiasis may delay physical and mental growth, slow development, and cause malnutrition.”

How is giardiasis spread?

According to the CDC, “The most common way people get sick is by swallowing contaminated drinking water or recreational water (for example from lakes, rivers, or pools).” Person-to-person transmission due to poor hand washing practices is another common way that *Giardia* parasites are spread, especially in childcare centers and institutions. Feces from an infected person or animal may “dirty” or contaminate water, food, or surfaces. This may include exposure to feces on contaminated surfaces such as bathroom handles, animals at petting zoos/farms, or via sexual contact.

How long are people contagious?

People may have *Giardia* in their feces from a few weeks to a few months. Treatment may shorten the time that people are contagious.

Who gets giardiasis?

Individuals who consume improperly treated or contaminated drinking water or recreational water are at risk of getting giardiasis. It can also easily spread in people in childcare centers or institutional settings by hand to mouth contact as described above.

What treatment is available for people with giardiasis?

- Some individuals may recover on their own without medication in a few days.
- Your healthcare provider may give you medicine to treat giardiasis if symptoms worsen or persist, are severe, or you have risk factors for spreading the infection to others.
- It is important for people with diarrhea to drink plenty of fluids to stay hydrated.

Do infected people need to be kept home from daycare, school, or work?

Infected persons **should not** go to daycare, school, or to jobs involving patient care or food handling. Most people may return to daycare, school, or work when diarrhea stops. At all times, they should maintain good hand hygiene practices.

How can I protect myself and my family from getting giardiasis?

You can decrease your chance of coming in contact with *Giardia* with these practices:

- Wash hands with soap and water especially after using the toilet, changing a diaper, after touching animals/pets, or before preparing and eating food. Sanitizing gel may be substituted when hands are not visibly soiled.
- Promptly clean contaminated surfaces with household chlorine bleach-based cleaners.
- Carefully dispose of sewage waste so as not to contaminate surface water or groundwater.
- Avoid food or water from sources that may be contaminated or untreated. If unsure, boil, filter, or disinfect water as directed for safe human consumption.
- If you or a family member has diarrhea, stay out of shared areas such as swimming pools.
- Children swimming should take bathroom breaks. For those in diapers, check diapers and change soiled diaper before they return to the pool.