

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis is a disease caused by a microscopic parasite (amoeba) called *Entamoeba histolytica*. This parasite is found in the United States and around the world.

Who is at risk for amebiasis?

Anyone can get amebiasis, but it occurs more often in people who live in tropical or subtropical areas with poor sanitation. In the United States, amebiasis is most often found in travelers to and immigrants from these areas as well as individuals who live in institutions that have poor sanitary conditions. Men who have sex with men can also become infected.

How can I become infected with *E. histolytica*?

You can become infected by: putting anything into your mouth that has touched the stool of a person who is infected with *E. histolytica*; swallowing something, such as water or food that is contaminated with *E. histolytica*; or touching and bringing to your mouth *E. histolytica* cysts (eggs) picked up from surfaces that are contaminated with *E. histolytica*.

What are the symptoms of amebiasis?

Only about 10% to 20% of people who are infected with *E. histolytica* become sick from the infection. Those people who do become sick usually develop only mild intestinal symptoms, which can include loose or watery stools, stomach pain and stomach cramping.

Amebic dysentery is a severe form of amebiasis associated with stomach pain, bloody stools and fever. Rarely, *E. histolytica* spreads outside the intestines to the liver and forms an abscess. Even less commonly, it spreads to other parts of the body, such as the lungs or brain.

If I swallowed *E. histolytica*, how quickly would I become sick?

Only about 10% to 20% of people who are infected with *E. histolytica* become sick from the infection. Those people who do become sick usually develop symptoms, within two to four weeks, but it can be shorter or longer.

For how long can an infected person carry this parasite?

Some people with amebiasis can carry the parasite for weeks to years, often without symptoms.

What should I do if I think I have amebiasis?

See your health care provider. Other infectious organisms, such as other parasites or bacteria, can cause similar symptoms.

Where are parasites that cause amebiasis found?

Infected people are the main source of the parasite. Fecal material from infected people can contaminate water or food, which then serves as a vehicle to infect others. Primates also become infected but are not considered a major source of infections for humans.

How is amebiasis diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask you to submit stool samples. Because *E. histolytica* can be difficult to diagnose, you might need to submit several stool specimens taken over several days.

A blood test is also available but is only recommended when your health care provider thinks that your infection may have spread beyond the intestines (gut) to some other organ of your body, such as the liver.

What is the treatment for amebiasis?

Several antibiotics are available to treat amebiasis. Treatment must be prescribed by a physician and might require more than one kind of medication.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

A person with amebiasis who attends a child care center or works in a sensitive occupation shall be excluded from the child care center or work in the sensitive occupation and may return after the diarrhea has ceased and three follow-up stool specimens are negative for *Entamoeba histolytica*. (See Ohio Administrative Code 3701-3-13.)

Should I be concerned about spreading infection to the rest of my household?

Yes. However, the risk of spreading infection is low if the infected person is treated with antibiotics and practices good personal hygiene. This includes thorough hand washing with soap and water before handling food, after changing diapers and after each toilet visit. Proper disposal of sewage is also important. Avoid anal-oral sexual contact.

The following intestinal amoebae do not make people sick and therefore are called "nonpathogenic:"

- *Chilomastix mesnili*
- *Endolimax nana*
- *Entamoeba coli*
- *Entamoeba dispar*
- *Entamoeba hartmanni*
- *Entamoeba polecki*
- *Iodamoeba buetschlii*

Where do these amoebae live in the body?

These amoebae are found only in the intestine and do not harm the body.

How did they get there?

The presence of one or more of them in a person's stool indicates that the person swallowed something, perhaps food or water, which was contaminated with stool that contained the amoebae. However, people infected with them may also have been exposed through contaminated stool to organisms that could make people sick.

I have not been feeling well. Are these amoebae the cause of my illness?

If you are having symptoms, such as diarrhea, the cause of your illness is not the amoebae. You and your healthcare provider should look for another cause. The cause may be infectious (i.e., infection with a parasite, virus or bacterium) or noninfectious (e.g., irritable bowel syndrome).

I have a weak immune system. Am I at greater risk of developing illness from these amoebae?

No. Studies have shown that these amoebae do not make people sick, even those who have a weakened immune system. Persons with a weakened immune system include persons with HIV/AIDS, people taking certain types of chemotherapy and people who have recently received an organ transplant.

How long do these amoebae stay in my body?

These amoebae can remain in a person's intestines for weeks, months or years.

Should I be treated for these amoebae?

No. Because these amoebae do not harm the body, they do not require treatment.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a healthcare provider. If you have any questions about the disease described above or think that you may have a parasitic infection, consult a healthcare provider.