

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis (GEE-are-DYE-uh-sis) is a diarrheal illness caused by a one-celled, microscopic parasite, *Giardia intestinalis* (also known as *Giardia lamblia*). Once an animal or person has been infected with *Giardia intestinalis*, the parasite lives in the intestine and is passed in the stool. Because the parasite is protected by an outer shell, it can survive outside the body and in the environment for long periods of time.

During the past 2 decades, *Giardia* infection has become recognized as one of the most common causes of waterborne disease (found in both drinking and recreational water) in humans in the United States. *Giardia* are found worldwide and within every region of the United States.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Diarrhea, abdominal cramps, gas and nausea are the most common symptoms of giardiasis. These symptoms may lead to weight loss and dehydration. However, not everyone infected has symptoms.

How long after being infected do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 1-2 weeks (average 7 days) after infection with the parasite.

How long do symptoms last?

In otherwise healthy persons, symptoms can last 2-6 weeks. Occasionally, symptoms last longer.

How can I get giardiasis?

The *Giardia* parasite lives in the intestine of infected humans or animals. Millions of germs can be released in a bowel movement from an infected human or animal. *Giardia* is found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated with the feces from infected humans or animals. You **can** become infected after accidentally swallowing the parasite; you **cannot** become infected through contact with blood. *Giardia* can be spread by:

- Accidentally putting something into your mouth or swallowing something that has come into contact with feces of a person or animal infected with *Giardia*.
- 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 contaminated with *Giardia*.
- Accidentally swallowing *Giardia* picked up from surfaces (such as bathroom fixtures, changing tables, diaper pails, or toys) contaminated with feces from an infected person. .

Who is at risk?

Persons at increased risk for giardiasis include child care workers, diaper-aged children who attend child care centers, international travelers, swimmers, hikers, campers and others who drink untreated water from contaminated sources. Several community-wide outbreaks

of giardiasis have been linked to drinking municipal water contaminated with *Giardia*.

What should I do if I think I have giardiasis?

See your health care provider, who will ask you to submit stool samples to see if you are harboring the parasite. Because *Giardia* can be difficult to diagnose, your health care provider may ask you to submit several stool specimens over several days.

What is the treatment for giardiasis?

Several prescription drugs are available to treat *Giardia*. Although *Giardia* can infect all people, young children and pregnant women may be more susceptible to dehydration resulting from diarrhea and should, therefore, drink plenty of fluids while ill.

How can I prevent giardiasis?

- Wash hands with soap and water after using the toilet and before handling food.
- Avoid water or food that may be contaminated.
- Wash and peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating.
- Avoid drinking water from lakes, rivers, springs, ponds or streams unless it has been filtered or chemically treated.
- During community-wide outbreaks caused by contaminated drinking water, boil drinking water for one minute to kill the *Giardia* parasite and make the water safe to drink.
- When traveling in countries where the water supply may be unsafe, avoid drinking unboiled tap water and avoid uncooked foods washed with unboiled tap water. Bottled or canned carbonated beverages, seltzers, pasteurized fruit drinks and steaming hot coffee and tea are safe to drink. You should check the label on bottled water to make sure it has been properly filtered before drinking.
- If you work in a child care center where you change diapers, be sure to wash your hands thoroughly with plenty of soap and warm water after every diaper change, even if you wear gloves.
- Avoid swimming in pools if you or your child has *Giardia*. *Giardia* cysts are fairly chlorine resistant and are passed in the stools of infected people for several weeks after they no longer have symptoms.

My water comes from a well. Should I have my well water tested?

Consider having your well water tested if you answer **yes** to the following questions:

- Are other members of your family or users of your well water ill? If yes, your well may be the source of infection.
- Is your well located at the bottom of a hill or is it considered shallow? If so, runoff from rain or flood water may be draining directly into your well causing contamination.
- Is your well in a rural area where animals graze? Well water can become fecally contaminated if animal waste seepage contaminates the ground water. This can occur if your well has cracked casings, is poorly constructed or is too shallow.

Tests specific for *Giardia* are expensive, difficult to run and usually require hundreds of gallons of water to be pumped through a filter. If you answered yes to the above questions, consider testing your well for fecal coliforms instead of *Giardia*. Although fecal coliform tests do not specifically test for *Giardia*, testing will show if your well has fecal contamination. If it does, the water is likely to be contaminated with *Giardia*, as well as other harmful bacteria and viruses. Look in your local telephone directory for a laboratory or cooperative extension that offers water testing.

My child was recently diagnosed as having giardiasis, but does not have diarrhea. My health care provider says treatment is not necessary. Is this true?

In general, according to the American Academy of Pediatrics, treatment is not necessary. However, there are a few exceptions. If your child does not have diarrhea, but is having nausea, or is fatigued, losing weight or has a poor appetite, you and your healthcare provider may wish to consider treatment. If your child attends a day care center where an outbreak is continuing to occur despite efforts to control it, screening and treatment of children without obvious symptoms may be a good idea. The same is true if several family members are ill, or if a family member is pregnant and therefore not able to take the most effective anti-*Giardia* medications.