

**What is *Giardia*?**

Giardia (GEE-are-dee-uh) is a one-celled, microscopic parasite that lives in the intestine in infected people and animals and is passed in the stool. *Giardia* can survive outside of the body and in the environment for long periods of time. *Giardia* causes an infectious disease called giardiasis (GEE-are-DYE-uh-sis) in people that affects the stomach and bowels. *Giardia* is a common cause of diarrhea in the United States.

Who is at risk for giardiasis?

People of all ages can become infected with giardiasis.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

The most common symptoms are diarrhea, greasy stools that tend to float, stomach cramps, upset stomach or nausea, bloating, increased gas, weakness, loss of appetite and weight loss. Some people have no symptoms at all.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of giardiasis usually appear seven to 10 days (but sometimes as long as four weeks) after the parasites are swallowed. The symptoms may come and go for weeks in a person who is not treated.

How is giardiasis spread?

The parasites must be swallowed to cause disease. You can get giardiasis if you swallow food or water or something picked up from surfaces (such as bathroom fixtures, changing tables, diaper pails or toys) that has been contaminated with feces (stool) of an infected person or animal. The parasites multiply in the small intestine and are passed out with bowel movements.

Giardiasis is often spread by accidentally putting something in your mouth or swallowing something that has come into contact with feces of a person or animal infected with *Giardia*. *Giardia* parasites have been found in the stools of many animals, including rodents, dogs, cats, cattle and wild animals. Animals may show symptoms of diarrhea when they are infected, but some animals have no symptoms at all.

Swallowing recreational water contaminated with *Giardia* – including water in swimming pools, hot tubs, fountains, lakes or rivers – is also a common source of the disease. Avoid swallowing water when swimming in recreational water, and avoid swimming while experiencing diarrhea if diagnosed with *Giardia*.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

It is unknown exactly how long a person is able to spread the disease because infected people who are untreated can carry the parasites in their stool, often for months.

How is a person diagnosed?

The laboratory will look at a sample of stool with a microscope to see if there are any *Giardia* parasites in it. This is the most common way of finding out if someone has giardiasis. *Giardia* can also be diagnosed by a laboratory test of a sample of fluid or a biopsy from the small intestine.

What is the treatment?

Several medicines are used to treat giardiasis. They are available only by prescription from your physician. Other treatments for diarrhea, such as drinking more fluids, also may be recommended by your physician.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No.

Should children or others be excluded from day care, school, work or other activities if they have giardiasis?

Exclude any child or adult with diarrhea from day care until the diarrhea has stopped.

Workers at food-related businesses, schools, residential programs, day-care and health-care facilities who feed, give mouth care or dispense medications to clients who have giardiasis must stay out of work until they no longer have diarrhea.

What can be done to prevent the spread of giardiasis disease?

Giardiasis can be prevented by thorough hand washing with running water and soap, good personal hygiene and avoiding swallowing water when swimming in recreational water. Protect others by not swimming if you are experiencing diarrhea (essential for children in diapers).

Additional Information:

For additional information, call the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

This disease is a reportable condition. As mandated by North Dakota law, any incidence of this disease shall be reported to the North Dakota Department of Health.

Resource: American Academy of Pediatrics. [chapter title]. In: Pickering LK, ed. Red Book: 2003 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases. 26th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2003:[123-127].
Control of Communicable Disease Manual, 18th Edition-2004, Heymann, David, MD ed.

