

# What is Giardiasis?

**Giardiasis** is a diarrhoeal illness caused by *Giardia duodenalis*, a one-celled, microscopic parasite that lives in the intestine of infected people and animals. *Giardia* is passed in the stool of an infected person or animal. The parasite is protected by an outer shell that allows it to survive outside the body in the environment for long periods of time (cyst form).

## What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Symptoms may include diarrhoea, loose or watery stools, stomach cramps, and upset stomach, possibly leading to weight loss and dehydration. Some people have no symptoms.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Generally 1–2 weeks after infection.

## How long will the symptoms last?

Usually 2–6 weeks, occasionally longer.

## How is giardiasis spread?

Millions of *Giardia* cysts can be released in a bowel movement from an infected person or animal. The parasite can be found in soil, food, water, or the surfaces of objects. It can be spread by swallowing contaminated water (e.g. from swimming pools, fountains, lakes, streams), eating uncooked contaminated food, and accidentally acquired from contaminated surfaces such as toys, bathroom fixtures, changing tables, or nappy buckets.

## Who is at risk?

Children, especially those who attend day care centres; childcare workers; international travellers; hikers, campers, swimmers and others who drink or accidentally swallow water from contaminated sources. The parasite exists world-wide but is more prevalent in warm climates, and among children.

## Should I worry about spreading the infection to others?

*Giardia* is very contagious and often spreads within families. Follow these guidelines to minimise the risk:

- Wash hands with soap and water after using the toilet, changing nappies, and before eating or preparing food.
- Avoid swimming for at least 2 weeks after diarrhoea stops. (*Giardia* passed in a stool can contaminate water for several weeks after symptoms have ended.)
- Avoid faecal exposure during sex.

## How is giardiasis diagnosed?

By stool sample microscopy, antigen testing or PCR.

## What is the treatment for giardiasis?

Several prescription drugs (e.g. tinidazole, metronidazole) are available for patients with symptoms. Treatment is not usually recommended for those without symptoms—except to stop the spread of infection in certain settings (e.g. a child in daycare).

## How can I avoid getting giardiasis?

- By practising good hygiene; washing hands thoroughly with soap and water;
- Avoiding water that might be contaminated;
- Not swallowing recreational water or untreated water from wells, streams, etc;
- Not drinking water or using ice in countries where the water supply is not safe;
- Avoiding food that might be contaminated (wash and/or peel all vegetables and fruits to be eaten raw).