

Giardiasis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis (GEE-ar-DYE-ah-sis) is an intestinal illness caused by a parasite called *Giardia lamblia*. It is a commonly reported cause of diarrheal illness in New Jersey. *G. lamblia* can be found in humans and other animals, such as beavers, thus a common name once used for giardiasis was "beaver fever."

Who gets giardiasis?

Anyone can get giardiasis, but it is frequently found in people living in institutional settings, in child care settings, and travelers to areas with poor sanitary conditions. People who drink untreated surface water, such as ponds, lakes and streams, are at increased risk of getting giardiasis.

How do people get giardiasis?

A person becomes infected with *Giardia* by swallowing eggs (cysts) of the parasite. This occurs when they eat or drink food or water contaminated with *Giardia* cysts. It is also spread by direct or indirect contact with stool from an infected person or animal. This may occur in child care settings, institutional settings or anywhere where handwashing habits are poor.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Many people with giardiasis do not experience symptoms. Symptoms may begin 3 to 25 days after swallowing *Giardia* cysts, but usually within 7 to 10 days. There is usually no fever.

People who become ill have symptoms that include:

- Diarrhea
- Abdominal cramps
- Pale and greasy stools
- Tiredness
- Bloating
- Weight loss

How is giardiasis diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects giardiasis, samples of the patient's stool will be examined.

What is the treatment for giardiasis?

Some people recover from giardiasis without any treatment. When therapy is necessary, antibiotics are often prescribed. The drugs currently used to treat giardiasis are effective in most but not all people; and relapses do occur. (NOTE: It is very important to finish your antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider)

Should a person infected with giardiasis be excluded from work or school?

An infected person is infectious (able to spread disease) to others as long as *G. lamblia* cysts are being passed in the stool. Cysts may be in the stool from several weeks up to several months after the symptoms have ended. It is important that people practice good personal hygiene, including washing their hands after going to the bathroom. People with diarrhea should remain home from work or school to minimize the risk of passing this infection on to others.

Special precautions for food handlers, health care workers and child care workers:

- Food handlers should be excluded from handling food until 24 hours after symptoms resolve.
- Healthcare workers who give direct patient care (e.g., feed patients, give mouth or denture care, or give medications) are considered food handlers and should be excluded until 24 hours after symptoms resolve.
- Child care workers infected with *G. lamblia* should not handle or prepare food until 24 hours after symptoms resolve.
- Consult your local health department for further advice in these circumstances.

How can giardiasis be prevented?

- Practice good handwashing habits (rubbing hands together under warm soapy water for at least 15 seconds) after going to the bathroom, before preparing meals, before eating, after changing diapers, and after playing with pets. Use of alcohol-based hand sanitizers may be used if soap or water are not available.
- Avoid drinking untreated surface water, such as water taken directly from ponds, lakes and streams, or water from unknown sources.
- Do not swallow water while swimming in pools, lakes, ponds or water parks.

Where can I get more information on giardiasis?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention www.cdc.gov

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.