

Yersiniosis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is yersiniosis?

Yersiniosis (YER-sin-ee-OH-sis) is an infection of the intestines caused by several types of *Yersinia* bacteria such as *Y. enterocolitica* or *Y. pseudotuberculosis*. In the United States, most human illness is caused by *Y. enterocolitica*.

Who gets yersiniosis?

Yersiniosis is uncommon. Anyone can get yersiniosis, but it is reported most frequently in children. New Jersey reports an average of 6 to 8 cases annually with the infection being more common in the winter months.

How is yersiniosis spread?

The *Yersinia* bacteria are most often spread by eating contaminated food, especially raw or undercooked pork products. Preparing raw pork intestines (chitterlings) may be particularly risky. Infants can be infected if their caretakers handle raw chitterlings and then do not properly wash their hands before handling the infant, or the infant's toys, bottles, or pacifiers.

Yersinia bacteria have also been found in unpasteurized milk, ice cream, tofu, and shellfish. The bacteria can also exist in ponds, lakes and streams contaminated with animal droppings. Occasionally infection can occur after handling infected animals such as puppies and kittens.

On rare occasions *Yersinia* can also be spread as a result of the bacteria passing from the stool of an infected person to the mouth of another person. This can happen when infected people do not wash their hands properly after using the bathroom and then touch food or objects that are placed in another person's mouth.

Rarely, the bacteria are transmitted by contaminated blood during a transfusion.

What are the symptoms of yersiniosis?

A person infected with *Yersinia* may have mild to severe diarrhea (which can be watery or bloody), abdominal pain, nausea, and fever. In older children and adults, pain on the right side of the abdomen and fever may be the most apparent symptoms and is sometimes confused with appendicitis. In a small number of cases, complications such as skin rashes, joint pain, or spread of bacteria to the bloodstream can occur.

Symptoms of yersiniosis typically occur within 3 to 7 days after swallowing the bacteria and may last 1 to 3 weeks or longer.

How is yersiniosis diagnosed?

Yersiniosis is usually diagnosed by examining samples of the patient's stool or blood. *Y. enterocolitica* can also be found in other areas of the body including the throat, lymph nodes, joint fluid, urine, bile, and blood.

What is the treatment for yersiniosis?

Uncomplicated cases of diarrhea due to *Yersinia* usually go away on their own without antibiotic treatment. However, in more severe cases, health care providers may prescribe antibiotics. (NOTE: it is very important to finish your antibiotics, even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider)

How long is an infected person infectious to others?

An infected person can spread yersiniosis to others as long as the bacteria are being passed in his/her stool. The *Yersinia* bacteria usually disappear from the stool after the diarrhea has stopped, but in some people the bacteria may be present for several weeks or months after the diarrhea has stopped.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

Most infected people should be able to return to work when they no longer have diarrhea. Infected people must remember to carefully wash their hands with soap and water after every bathroom visit. Food handlers, patient care givers (such as nurses) and those who provide care for young children (such as child care workers) should not work while they have symptoms. Young children who attend child care should be kept at home while they have diarrhea.

What can be done to prevent yersiniosis?

- Avoid eating raw or undercooked pork.
- Avoid drinking raw unpasteurized milk or untreated water from streams, lakes or ponds.
- Practice good hand washing habits before preparing meals and before eating.
- Wash hands with soap and water thoroughly before eating and preparing food, after contact with animals or their droppings, after going to the bathroom, after changing diapers, and after handling raw meat.
- People handling pork intestines should wash their hands carefully with soap and water after contact with the product and before touching infants or their toys, bottles, or pacifiers.
- Anyone with diarrhea should not prepare food for others.

General steps to prevent spreading germs in the kitchen:

- Raw meats should be kept away from fruits, vegetables, cooked food and all ready-to-eat foods.
- Use separate cutting boards for meats and other foods. Carefully clean all cutting boards, counter-tops and utensils with soap and hot water after preparing raw meat, poultry, eggs or seafood.
- Wash your hands carefully after handling uncooked foods. Hands should be washed between handling different food items.
- Wash your hands with soap after touching animals or their droppings.
- Anyone with diarrhea should not prepare food for others.

Where can I get more information on yersiniosis?

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