

Cryptosporidiosis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis (krip-toe-spo-rid-ee-oh-sis) is an intestinal illness caused by infection with the parasite *Cryptosporidium parvum*. Both humans and animals can become infected. The parasite lives in the intestine and produces eggs (cysts) that are passed from the body in the stool.

Who gets cryptosporidiosis?

Anyone can get cryptosporidiosis, but people with weak immune systems are at a higher risk for a more serious illness. Weak immune systems can be caused by HIV/AIDS infection, certain drugs (such as those used to treat cancer or for transplant patients) and some diseases that run in families (inherited diseases).

How is cryptosporidiosis spread?

Cryptosporidiosis is spread when people swallow water or food that was contaminated with infected stool or sewage. The parasite can also spread if people don't wash their hands properly after using the toilet and then touch objects that may be placed in another person's mouth. Outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis happen when people swallow water at water parks, swimming pools, lakes and ponds, child care center pools and fountains where infected people have been swimming. Chlorine used in swimming pools and water parks does not kill the parasite.

What are the symptoms of cryptosporidiosis?

The most common symptoms may include:

- Diarrhea
- Stomach cramps
- Upset stomach
- Vomiting
- Low fever

Some people with cryptosporidiosis have no symptoms. Symptoms usually appear 2 to 10 days (7 days on average) after swallowing the *Cryptosporidium* parasite. Symptoms usually last about 2 weeks. Symptoms may get better and then get worse.

How is cryptosporidiosis diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects infection with cryptosporidium, samples of the patient's stool should be examined. *Cryptosporidium* may be hard to find (it is not shed in the stool every day, or in great amounts) so you may be asked to give several stool samples over several days. Special laboratory tests that are not routinely done on all stool samples are needed to find *Cryptosporidium*. Therefore, your doctor needs to specifically request testing for *Cryptosporidium*.

What is the treatment for cryptosporidiosis?

Most people recover on their own if they have a healthy immune system. A drug called nitazoxanide can be used to treat diarrhea caused by *Cryptosporidium* in people with healthy immune systems.

People with cryptosporidiosis should drink plenty of water to replace fluid lost from the body due to diarrhea. Ask your doctor about using over-the-counter or prescription drugs to control the diarrhea. People who are in poor health or who have a weak immune system are at higher risk for more severe illness, and it is important for them to be under the care of a doctor if infected with the parasite.

Can people with cryptosporidiosis pass the illness to others?

An infected person can spread the parasite to others as long as *Cryptosporidium* eggs are being passed in the stool. This may last for several weeks after the symptoms end.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

In general, people infected with *Cryptosporidium* may return to work or school when they no longer have diarrhea. The type of personal contact people have with each other in work or school settings does not normally spread the parasite.

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. Consult your local health department for further advice in these situations.

How can cryptosporidiosis be prevented?

- **ALWAYS wash hands** thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet, changing a diaper, helping a child to use the toilet, before preparing food and drinks, and before eating.
- **ALWAYS wash hands** thoroughly after having contact with animal droppings, particularly farm animals such as cows, sheep and goats, or after visiting a farm or other type of animal facility.
- Do not swallow water while swimming in pools, water parks, lakes, ponds, etc.
- **NEVER** swim or use water parks if you or your child have diarrhea (no matter what is causing the diarrhea).
- Do not drink untreated water from shallow wells, lakes, rivers, springs, ponds and streams (such as when hiking or camping). Boiling water at a "rolling boil" for at least one minute will kill this and most other harmful parasites and germs. Or use a filter that has an absolute pore size of at least one micron or one that has been NSF rated for "cyst removal."
- Wash and/or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating. Fresh produce can sometimes have the parasite on the surface.
- Anyone with diarrhea should not prepare food for others.

Where can I get more information?

- 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/parasites/crypto/
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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.