

# Kent County Health Department Giardiasis Fact Sheet



## What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis (GEE-are-DYE-us-sis) is a diarrhea illness. It is caused by *Giardia lamblia*, a one-celled microscopic parasite. The parasite lives in the intestine of people and animals. It is protected by an outer shell that allows it to survive outside the body and in the environment for long periods of time.

## What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually start one to two weeks after being infected but may take up to four weeks to appear. They include:

- Bloating
- Stomach cramps
- Pale, greasy stools
- Flatulence (gas)
- Diarrhea

Fever and vomiting are rare.

A person may begin to lose weight, become tired and dehydrated due to the symptoms.

Generally, symptoms last two to six weeks but may last longer.

Some people may have no symptoms.

## How is giardiasis spread?

Besides people or animals, the *Giardia* parasite can be found in soil, food or water, or on surfaces that have been contaminated with the waste from infected people or animals. *Giardia* can be spread by:

- Putting something in your mouth or accidentally swallowing something that has come in contact with waste

material of a person or animal infected with *Giardia*.

- Drinking water from lakes, ponds, streams, fountains, hot tubs or swimming pools that have been contaminated by an infected person or animal.
- Eating unwashed raw fruits and/or vegetables, or uncooked foods that were touched by soiled hands of food handlers.
- Oral sexual contact.

**Giardiasis is not spread by contact with blood.**

**Note:** A person who has symptoms of diarrhea should not work as a food handler or take care of patients, children or senior citizens.

## Who's at risk?

Everyone! However, some groups of people are at a higher risk. These groups are:

- Child care workers
- Children who attend day care centers (including children still in diapers)
- International travelers
- Hikers
- Campers
- Swimmers

International travelers can lower their risk of getting sick by not drinking the water or using ice in countries where the water supply may be unsafe.

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How is giardiasis diagnosed and treated?

When you visit your doctor or health care provider, you will be asked to provide a stool sample. Since giardiasis is hard to diagnose, you may be asked to provide samples over several days.

Giardiasis is treated with medication. Your doctor will prescribe what will work best for you.

How can I prevent giardiasis?

Giardiasis is very contagious. If you get it, you have to be very careful not to spread it to other people.

- Wash your hands with soap and water after using the bathroom, changing diapers, or handling clothes or sheets soiled by stool.
- Wash your hands before handling or eating food.
- Don't swim in pools, hot tubs, lakes, rivers, the ocean or other bodies of water if you have diarrhea. Wait at least two weeks after the diarrhea stops before you swim again.
- Use a safe water supply to wash fruits and vegetables that will be eaten raw.
- Avoid eating uncooked food in countries where the water supply may be unsafe.
- Use a safe water supply to brush your teeth, make ice cubes or to drink from.
- Avoid fecal contact during sex.

How to wash your hands

1. Use warm water and liquid soap.
2. Lather all parts of the hands and rub briskly for 20 seconds. Be sure to include:
  - the backs of your hands
  - between your fingers
  - wrists
3. Use a brush or nail file to clean under your fingernails.
4. Rinse well under warm running water.
5. Dry hands with a paper towel or air dryer. Don't use a cloth towel.
6. Turn off the water using the paper towel instead of your clean hands.

*This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self-diagnosis or as a substitute for talking with a health care provider. If you have any questions about giardiasis or think you may have it, call your health care provider.*