



## Giardia Infection

### Environmental Health Guide

#### What is Giardia Infection?

Giardia infection causes an illness called Giardiasis. This is a bowel infection caused by a tiny protozoan organism called *Giardia lamblia*. *Giardia lamblia* is a pear-shaped single-celled parasite that lives in the bowel of both humans and animals. It attaches itself in large numbers to the gut wall, interfering with the body's natural absorption of nutrients.

In Western Australia, over 700 cases of *Giardia* infection are reported each year. More than half of cases occur in Perth and over half of all cases of Giardiasis involve infants and children under five years of age. However, *Giardia* can infect anybody at any age and is found throughout the world in temperate as well as tropical climates.

#### Symptoms of Giardiasis

The symptoms of *Giardia* infection are not pleasant but can be cured with treatment prescribed by your doctor. In rare cases symptoms may persist for years. However, in the great majority of cases, parasites and symptoms gradually disappear over time.

The following symptoms are usually recorded between 7-10 days (but may take longer) from the time of exposure:

- \* foul smelling greasy or watery diarrhoea
- \* abdominal cramps
- \* nausea
- \* weight loss
- \* fatigue
- \* bloating
- \* belching and wind
- \* loss of appetite

However, some people can be carriers of the infection but remain free of symptoms.

#### How Do You Get it?

*Giardia* infections are usually caused by eating or drinking food or water that contain *Giardia* cysts derived from faecal contamination or from infected surfaces via hand to mouth transfer. Examples of potential sources of *Giardia* contamination are:

- \* rivers, streams, springs, ponds, lakes, swimming pools
- \* uncooked food, fruit and vegetables
- \* surfaces of toys, bathroom fixtures, nappy changing tables
- \* person to person contact between young children
- \* sexual activities



Although less common, food handlers can contaminate cooked food with *Giardia* if they do not wash their hands after going to the toilet.

**It is possible to be a carrier and spread the disease without being ill.**

## How is it Spread?

As part of their life cycle, *Giardia* cells detach from the gut wall and form cysts which pass out of the body in the faeces. These cysts can survive for several weeks or months outside the body and may be picked up from faecally contaminated surfaces, food or water.

## Who is Most Likely to Get It?

Children who are not toilet trained, childcare workers, international travellers (particularly to South East Asia), hikers and campers are at greatest risk. However, outbreaks can occur in communities if the local drinking water supply has been contaminated with faeces containing cysts.

## What To Do if You Think You have It

- ✓ See your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe specific anti-*Giardia* treatments if the disease is diagnosed.
- ✓ Take particular care that you wash your hands with soap and water before preparing food.
- ✗ Don't enter a swimming pool or a spa until you are symptom free for at least 48 hours.

## Remember - To Stop Giardia Infection

- ✓ Wash your hands with soap and water after going to the toilet and before handling or eating food.
- ✓ Wash or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating.
- ✓ Wash separately all articles of clothing soiled with faeces.
- ✓ Practise safe sex.
- ✗ Don't drink untreated water.
- ✗ Don't share your towel or wash it with other clothing or linen.
- ✗ Don't enter swimming pools if you or a member of your household has *Giardia*. Wait at least 48 hours after antibiotic treatment.
- ✗ Don't handle food, if you are a food handler, unless a medical clearance certificate has been obtained.
- ✗ Don't send children with diarrhoea to school or day care until the diarrhoea has ceased.

## For travellers visiting remote areas of Australia or overseas:

- ✓ Always make sure that the drinking water is safe to drink. If you suspect the water to be contaminated or untreated, boil it for one minute before drinking.
- ✓ Only consume freshly cooked foods and beverages, bottled water, canned food and fresh fruit and vegetables that you can peel.
- ✗ Do not eat raw foods washed with tap water that has not been boiled.

## Further Information

For further information contact your doctor, or your local government Environmental Health Officer, or

Environmental Health Directorate  
Department of Health  
PO Box 8172  
PERTH BUSINESS CENTRE WA 6849  
Telephone: (08) 9388 4999  
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