

YERSINIOSIS Q & A

What is yersiniosis?

Yersiniosis is an infectious disease caused by a bacterium of the genus *Yersinia*. In the United States, most human illness is caused by one species, *Yersinia enterocolitica*.

Who gets yersiniosis?

Anyone can be infected with *Yersinia*. In Georgia, this illness is mainly seen in infants and young children, but adolescents and adults can also be infected.

How is yersiniosis spread?

One becomes infected with *Yersinia* after eating raw or undercooked pork, or by accidentally consuming the organism following contact with contaminated hands or environmental surfaces during or after the preparation of pork. Chitterlings (chitlins), a food made with pig intestines, is the primary type of pork associated with yersiniosis in Georgia. *Yersinia* is a hardy organism, because it can survive in very cold environments (refrigerators) and on surfaces (food containers, kitchen counters and utensils) for long periods of time. This is why careful preparation of food is as important as cooking the food. As a first step after chitlins are brought into the house, chitlins should be boiled before being placed in a refrigerator or before any further handling. In addition, children, particularly infants and toddlers, should be removed from the kitchen while preparing pork or chitlins, at least until all surfaces that may have come in contact with the food have been cleaned with soap and hot water. Because *Yersinia* are bacteria that inhabit the intestines of pigs, farmers should dispose of livestock feces in a sanitary manner.

What are the symptoms of yersiniosis?

Infection with *Y. enterocolitica* can cause a variety of symptoms depending on the age of the person infected. Common symptoms in children are fever, abdominal pain, and diarrhea, which is often bloody. In older children and adults, right-sided abdominal pain and fever may be the predominant symptoms, and may be confused with appendicitis. In a small

proportion of cases, complications such as skin rash, joint pains, or spread of bacteria to the bloodstream can occur.

How soon do symptoms appear after exposure?

Symptoms usually appear three to seven days after exposure, usually not more than ten days.

When and for how long is a person able to spread Yersinia?

Spread from one person to another is rare, but can occur for as long as a person has diarrhea, generally two to three weeks. Someone who has not received treatment could potentially spread the organism for two to three months.

Does past infection with Yersinia make a person immune?

No. Re-infection can readily occur immediately. There is no evidence of natural resistance.

What is the treatment for yersiniosis?

Yersiniosis may be treated with antibiotics like co-trimoxazole and ciprofloxacin. For serious infections, aminoglycosides can be used.

What can be done to prevent the infection?

- Avoid eating raw or undercooked pork.
- Consume only pasteurized milk or milk products.
- Wash hands with soap and water before eating and preparing food, after contact with animals, and after handling raw meat.
- After handling raw chitterlings, clean hands and fingernails thoroughly with soap and water before touching infants or their toys, bottles, or pacifiers. Someone other than the food handler should care for children while chitterlings are being prepared.
- Prevent cross-contamination in the kitchen. Use separate cutting boards for meat and other foods. Carefully clean all cutting

boards, counter-tops, and utensils with soap and hot water after preparing raw meat.

- Dispose of animal feces in a sanitary manner.

Where can I get additional information on yersiniosis?

Contact the Georgia Division of Public Health, Epidemiology Branch, by email at

gaepinfo@dhr.state.ga.us. The following web site may be useful:

- CDC *Yersinia enterocolitica* fact sheet – http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/yersinia_g.htm

