

GIARDIASIS Q&A

What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasite called *Giardia intestinalis*. It is a fairly common cause of diarrheal illness, and more than a thousand cases have been reported in Georgia each year since 1998. Cases may occur sporadically, in clusters, or as outbreaks.

Who gets giardiasis?

Anyone can get giardiasis but the disease tends to occur more often among children and staff at day care centers, persons in institutional settings, foreign travelers, campers, and individuals who consume inadequately treated surface water (rivers, lakes, streams, ponds). Homosexual males may also be at increased risk of contracting giardiasis.

How is the Giardia parasite spread?

The parasite is passed in the feces of an infected person or animal and may contaminate water or food. Person-to-person transmission may occur in day care centers or any setting where hand washing practices are poor.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

People infected with *Giardia* may experience mild or severe diarrhea, bloating, abdominal cramping, foul smelling stool, or in some instances may have no symptoms at all. Fever is rarely present. Occasionally, some will have chronic diarrhea over several weeks or months, with significant weight loss.

How soon do symptoms appear?

The symptoms usually occur 7 to 10 days after initial exposure, but may appear anywhere from 3 to 25 days after exposure.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the giardia parasite?

The carrier state generally lasts from a few weeks to a few months. Treatment with specific antibiotics may shorten the carrier stage.

Where are the giardia parasites found?

Giardia has been found in infected people (with or without symptoms) and wild and domestic animals. The beaver is a potential source of *Giardia* contamination of lakes, reservoirs and streams, but human fecal wastes are a more likely source of contamination.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

People with active diarrhea who are unable to control their bowel habits (infants, young children, certain handicapped individuals, etc.) should be excluded from settings such as day care or group activities where they may present a risk to others. After they have been treated and have recovered, they may be permitted to return; however, scrupulous attention to handwashing after diaper changes and toilet use is required. Individuals who are not in high-risk settings may return to their routine activities when they have recovered, provided that they carefully wash their hands after using the toilet.

What is the treatment for giardiasis?

Antibiotics such as metronidazole, albendazole, or furazolidone are often used to treat the disease. However, some individuals may recover without treatment.

How can giardiasis be prevented?

- Carefully wash hands thoroughly before handling food, before eating, after using the toilet, and after diapering a baby.
- Avoid consuming inadequately treated water, particularly from lakes, streams, rivers, and ponds.
- Properly dispose of sewage wastes so as not to contaminate surface or ground water.

Where can I get additional information on giardiasis?

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

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

- CDC Giardiasis Fact Sheet – <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/giardiasis/default.htm>
- FDA Bad Bug Book – <http://vm.cfsan.fda.gov/~mow/chap22.html>

