

Giardiasis

Community and Public Health

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Giardiasis caused by the *Giardia* parasite found in the gut of animals such as cattle, sheep, cats, dogs, rats and possums.

Giardia are widespread in New Zealand and the parasites can live in the environment for long periods, especially in lake, river, stream and roof water.

What are the symptoms?

Giardia may cause foul smelling diarrhoea, stomach cramps and abdominal pain, nausea and vomiting, weight loss, bloating, slight fever, headache and fatigue. Symptoms appear between 3 and 25 days (usually 7 to 10 days) after becoming infected.

The person will usually be ill for 3 to 4 days and without treatment may remain infectious for months. During this time the person can spread the parasite to others, even when he/she has no symptoms.

How is it caught or spread?

People become infected when they swallow the parasites from contact with:

- contaminated water and food,
- infected animals or humans, or
- contaminated recreational water.

This contact can occur in New Zealand or while travelling overseas.

Giardia can spread in families especially when an infected child shares bath water, in rural environments and early child care facilities.

How is it treated?

You will need to visit your doctor for diagnosis and treatment. Treatment requires taking a course of medicine.

Drinking plenty of fluids is recommended while the diarrhoea lasts - to prevent dehydration.

Go back to your doctor if it is your child who is sick and he/she is not drinking.

Doctors are required to report this illness to the Medical Officer of Health. The local Public Health Unit may contact you to find out how you caught the parasite.

How is the spread prevented?

There are a few things you can do to avoid getting infected or passing the illness on to others.

Washing hands

When you wash your hands, do it thoroughly by using plenty of soap, cleaning under your fingernails, rinsing your hands well and drying them on a clean towel;

- before and after preparing food;
- after going to the toilet or changing a baby's nappy;
- after caring for people with giardiasis; and
- after contact with animals.

It is best to avoid preparing food for other people if you have giardiasis, but if you have to, first wash your hands carefully.



Having a bath

Do not share bathwater with someone who has had the infection in the past two weeks.

Drinking water in rural areas

Water for drinking that is taken from the roof, rivers, lakes etc, should be boiled for one minute, or an approved filter used.

When using roof water, spouting should be cleaned regularly and roofs kept clear of bird and animal droppings. Avoid placing aerials on the roof for birds to perch on and avoid planting trees close to the house to prevent animals from getting on to the roof.

When you visit a swimming pool

No one should go swimming in a pool if they have diarrhoea. Wait until at least two weeks after the symptoms have gone.

- Take your children to the toilet and wash hands before they swim.
- Shower yourself and your children using soap (particularly in the area around the bottom) before entering the pool.
- Ensure babies and young children swim in tight-fitting togs - not nappies. This will prevent poo from getting into the water. Wash your hands after changing the baby.
- Report any faecal accidents (poo in the water) to the pool attendant immediately.
- Avoid swallowing pool water.

When camping and tramping

- Use toilets when they are provided.
- When no toilets are provided, bury toilet waste and paper. Make sure you bury it at least 50 metres away from any water source such as rivers and lakes.
- Do not wash your hands directly in the water. Collect water, wash your hands in it and then drain it into the ground away from the water source.

Time off work or school

People should stay away from work, school or preschool while they are unwell. Usually people can return to work or school when they are free of symptoms.

Those working with food, or employed in a hospital, rest home or early childhood centre are required to stay away from work until 48 hours after symptoms are gone.

Contact Community and Public Health for more information:

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