

## What is Giardia?

Giardia is a parasite found in the gut of animals such as cattle, sheep, cats, dogs, rats and possums. It is passed on in the faeces and when humans become infected the parasite can result in the disease giardiasis. Giardia is widespread in New Zealand and the parasites can live in the environment for long periods, especially in lake, river, stream and roof water.

## How does a person become infected?

People become infected when they swallow the parasites. This may be from contaminated water and food, or from contact with infected animals or humans. Giardia is not uncommonly spread in families when an infected child shares bath water.

## The signs and symptoms of the illness

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 - 10 days) after becoming infected. The person will usually be ill for 3 - 4 days and without treatment may remain infectious for months. During this time the person can spread the parasite to other people, even when he/she has no symptoms.

## Treatment of Giardia infection

- For advice, testing and treatment, you will need to visit your doctor.
- Your doctor will prescribe a course of medicine.
- Drink plenty of fluids while the diarrhoea lasts, to prevent dehydration. Follow your doctor's instructions.
- Go back to your doctor if it is your child who is sick and he/she is not drinking.
- If you have giardia infection the doctor is required to report this to the Medical Officer of Health of the Public Health Service. They may contact you to find out how you contracted the parasite.

## Taking time off work or school

Usually people can go back to work and children can return to early childhood centres and school when the symptoms are gone. However, as giardia infection is a notifiable disease you will need to check with your doctor or health protection officer first. If you are working with food, or employed in a hospital, rest home, school or early childhood centre you may be required to stay away from work until you are tested free from giardia infection.

## How to avoid getting giardia infection and passing it on to others

Wash your hands thoroughly by using plenty of soap, cleaning under fingernails, rinsing hands well and drying on a clean towel before and after preparing food, after going to the toilet or changing in a baby's nappy, after caring for people with giardia and after contact with animals. It is best to avoid preparing food for other people if you have giardia infection but if you have to, first wash your hands carefully. Do not share bath water with someone who has had the infection in the past two weeks.

## Water in rural areas

- Drinking water taken from the roof, rivers, lakes etc, should be boiled for one minute or an approved filter (Standards AS/NZS4348: 1955) should be used.
- When using roof water, spouting should be cleaned regularly and roofs kept clear of bird and animal droppings.
- Avoid placing TV 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

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

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

## Help keep the environment free of giardia when 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 in the ground away from the water source.

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