

# Giardiasis

## Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease  
Control and Prevention

An Office of the  
Department of Health and Human Services

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### What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is a diarrheal illness caused by a germ (a parasite) called *Giardia*. This germ is a common cause of diarrhea in the United States.

### How is giardiasis spread?

The parasite must be swallowed to cause disease. It can be spread by:

- Swallowing something that has come into contact with feces of a person or animal infected with *Giardia*
- Swallowing recreational water contaminated with *Giardia*
- Eating uncooked food contaminated with *Giardia*
- Swallowing *Giardia* picked up from surfaces (such as bathroom fixtures, changing tables, diaper pails, or toys) contaminated with feces from an infected person

Persons who are more likely to become infected with *Giardia* include children attending day care; child care workers; parents or caretakers of infected children; backpackers, hikers, and campers who drink unfiltered, untreated water; people who drink from shallow wells; and persons with history of travel to areas where the disease is common.

### What are the signs and symptoms of giardiasis?

Giardiasis can cause a variety of intestinal symptoms, which include:

- Diarrhea
- Gas or flatulence
- Greasy stools that tend to float
- Stomach cramps
- Upset stomach or nausea

These symptoms may lead to weight loss and dehydration. Symptoms usually appear 1 to 4 weeks after infection and last 2 to 6 weeks. Some people with giardiasis have no symptoms at all.

### How do I know if I have giardiasis?

Your healthcare provider must send your stool sample to a laboratory. The laboratory will look at the sample with a microscope to see if there are any *Giardia* parasites in it. The germs are often hard to see, so they may need several stool samples from you. This is the most common way of finding out if someone has giardiasis. Other methods may be used to tell if you have *Giardia* in your stool.

### How is giardiasis treated?

There are several medicines that are used to treat giardiasis. They are available by prescription from your healthcare provider. Other treatments for diarrhea—such as drinking more fluids—may be recommended by your healthcare provider.

### How does *Giardia* get into food and water?

*Giardia* lives in the intestine of infected humans or animals. Millions of germs can be released in a bowel movement from an infected human or animal. *Giardia* is found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated with the feces from infected humans or animals.

### Are there long term consequences to giardiasis?

Persons with giardiasis who have an otherwise healthy immune system usually recover fully with or without treatment. In some cases treatment failure may occur. Relapse is common in patients who do not have a healthy immune system; they may require prolonged treatment.

### If I have giardiasis, can I get it again?

Yes. Persons that have giardiasis and have completed treatment can have reappearance of symptoms. This is often due to one of two reasons: re-infection or treatment failure. If you have recently been treated for giardiasis and your symptoms reappear, be sure to talk to your healthcare provider to determine the cause and appropriate next steps.

### How can giardiasis be prevented?

Giardiasis can be prevented by practicing good hygiene and by using caution before drinking

water from an unknown source. Some general guidelines are:

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before meals, before preparing food, after using the toilet, and after changing diapers.
- Do not drink untreated water from a surface water supply, such as a pond, lake, or stream. If untreated water is all that is available, boil the water for 1 minute before drinking it.
- If you are taking care of a person with giardiasis, scrub your hands with plenty of soap and water after contact with the person's stool. Promptly and carefully dispose of any material that has been contaminated with stool, and always wash your hands after such contact.
- If your source of drinking water is a well or a private surface water supply, do not allow humans or animals to leave bowel contents near the water.

**If my water comes from a private well, should I have my well water tested?**

If you obtain your drinking water from a private well, consider testing your well water for bacterial contamination once a year. For more information, please visit the website:  
<http://wellwater.maine.gov>.

**How common is giardiasis?**

Each year, more than 20,000 cases of giardiasis are reported in the United States. Giardiasis is common in settings where hygiene is poor and in areas where there is little to no treatment of drinking water. Children under 5 years of age are most likely to get giardiasis.

**Giardiasis in Maine**

With about 200 cases of giardiasis reported to the Maine CDC every year, giardiasis is one of the most commonly reported infectious diseases in Maine. Cases usually peak in the summer months when the climate is warm and provides an ideal environment for exposure to the germ that causes the infection. Cases in children less than 5 years of age and cases related to daycare centers and eating establishments are investigated by the Maine CDC to identify sources of public health concern and to prevent further spread of the disease. Other cases may be investigated if indicated. If cases occur in a daycare center, the Maine CDC may need to work

with parents and staff to improve hand washing among the staff, children, and their families.

**Where can I get more information?**

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.