



# Giardiasis

## Fact Sheet

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### What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is caused by a parasite called *Giardia*. It is the most common intestinal parasite that affects people.

### How is it spread?

The parasite makes you sick when swallowed. Swallowing as few as 10 *Giardia* cysts might cause illness. *Giardia* can be spread by:

- Swallowing something that has come into contact with feces of an infected person or animal.
- Swallowing *Giardia* picked up from surfaces (such as bathroom fixtures, changing tables, diaper pails, or toys) contaminated with feces from an infected person
- Swallowing water while swimming or playing in water where *Giardia* may live- such as lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, and streams
- Eating uncooked food that has come into contact with *Giardia*
- Having contact with someone who is ill with giardiasis
- Traveling to countries where giardiasis is common

Persons who are more likely to become infected include children in day care; child care workers; parents or caretakers of infected children; backpackers, hikers, and campers who drink unfiltered, untreated water; persons who drink from shallow wells; persons with history of travel to areas where the disease is common and persons exposed to human feces through sexual contact.

### What are the signs and symptoms?

Symptoms include:

- Diarrhea
- Gas
- Greasy stools that may float
- Stomach cramps
- Upset stomach or nausea

These symptoms may lead to weight loss and dehydration. Symptoms usually appear 1 to 3 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 it?

Contact your healthcare provider if you have symptoms of giardiasis. The only way to know for sure that you have the disease is to have a stool sample tested at the laboratory. You may be asked to submit several stool samples collected over several days.

### How is it treated?

There are medicines that your doctor may want to give you. Everyone with diarrhea should drink lots of fluids to prevent dehydration.

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

*Giardia* lives in the gut of infected humans or animals. Millions of parasites can be released in feces. *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?

Persons who are otherwise healthy usually recover fully with or without treatment. Sometimes, the treatment can fail. Patients who do not have a healthy immune system may require prolonged treatment.

### Can I get it again?

Yes. Symptoms can reappear in persons who completed treatment for giardiasis. This is often due to either 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 next steps.

### How can it be prevented?

Illness can be prevented with good hygiene and by using caution before drinking water that might be unsafe.

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water:
  - before eating
  - before, during, and after preparing food
  - after using the toilet and after changing diapers
  - after touching animals or their living spaces
- Watch and help young children when washing hands
- Do not drink untreated water from a surface water supply, such as a pond, lake, or stream.
- Do not use or drink poorly treated water or use ice when traveling in countries where the water supply might be unsafe
- Use safe, uncontaminated water to wash all food that is to be eaten raw
- If the safety of drinking water is in doubt (for example, during or after an outbreak, in a place with poor hygiene or lack of water treatment systems), do one of the following:
  - Drink bottled water
  - Heat tap water to a rolling boil for 1 minute
  - Use a filter that has been tested and rated by National Safety Foundation (NSF) Standard 53 or NSF Standard 58 for cyst and oocyst reduction; filtered tap water will need additional treatment to kill other germs.
- If your source of drinking water is a well or a private surface water supply, do not allow humans or animals to leave feces near the water.
- At recreational water venues (pools, beaches, etc.)
  - Do not swallow water while swimming
  - Protect others by not swimming if you have diarrhea (especially diapered children)
  - Shower before entering the water
  - Take children on frequent bathroom breaks and check their diapers often
  - Wash children very well (especially their bottoms) with soap and water after they use the bathroom and before they enter the water

- If you are taking care of a person with giardiasis, scrub your hands with plenty of soap and water after contact. Quickly and carefully dispose of materials contaminated with stool, and always wash your hands after such contact.
- Use barriers during oral-anal sex; wash hands after handling condoms or barriers used during anal sex

**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 bacteria once a year. For more information, please visit: <http://wellwater.maine.gov>.

**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 or visiting [www.maine.gov/idepi](http://www.maine.gov/idepi). The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another great source of health information.