

## Fact sheet

# Giardiasis (Giardia)

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### What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is a diarrheal illness caused by a tiny parasite *Giardia lamblia* that is usually spread through water. This parasite can survive for long periods of time in water or on other surfaces.

### How is giardiasis spread?

The illness is spread when *Giardia* parasites enter your body from ingesting contaminated food or water. Once an animal or person has been infected with *Giardia*, the parasite lives in the intestine and is passed into the environment in the stool (poop). You only need to ingest a small amount of *Giardia* parasites to become ill. The most common cause of illness is drinking water contaminated with *Giardia* parasites. Water from lakes or streams can be contaminated, even if the water appears clean. Person-to-person transmission has also been known to occur in childcare centers and in long-term care facilities and institutions.

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

The most common symptoms of giardiasis are diarrhea with loose and pale greasy stools, gas, stomach cramps, bloating, weight loss, and fatigue. Fever and vomiting are rare. Many people who become infected with *Giardia* do not have symptoms, but can still spread infection. Young children and pregnant women may be more likely to get dehydrated from

diarrhea and should drink plenty of fluids while ill.

### How long after infection do symptoms appear?

After eating or drinking contaminated food or beverages, it may take 1–4 weeks before you get sick. Diarrhea usually begins within 7–10 days, but may be as early as 5 days or as late as 25 days after infection with *Giardia*.

### Who is most at risk?

- Children who attend childcare centers, including diaper-aged children
- Childcare workers
- Parents of infected children
- Caregivers who take care of infected people
- Pregnant women
- People with severely weakened immune systems
- International travelers
- People who drink unfiltered, untreated water
- People who drink from untreated shallow, unprotected wells

### What type of health problems are caused by giardiasis?

Giardiasis can cause weight loss and failure to absorb fat, lactose, vitamin A and vitamin B12.

## How is giardiasis diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask you to submit stool samples to check for the parasite.

Giardiasis can be difficult to diagnose, so your provider may ask you to submit several stool samples over several days.

## How is giardiasis treated?

Most people who have a healthy immune system will recover without treatment. The symptoms of diarrhea can be treated. If you have diarrhea, drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration. Several effective prescription drugs are available to treat giardiasis.

Treatment time varies depending on the drug prescribed.

## Where is *Giardia* found?

*Giardia* parasites can be found in dogs, beavers, and other domestic and wild animals. It is also found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated with the feces (poop) from infected humans or animals.

Giardiasis occurs worldwide and *Giardia* is the most common intestinal parasite identified by public health laboratories in the United States.

## How can giardiasis be prevented?

- Wash hands with soap and water after using the toilet and after every diaper change, especially if you work with diaper-aged children, even if you are wearing gloves.
- Dispose of animal waste properly so water sources will not be infected.
- Avoid water that might be contaminated.
- Wash all fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating.

## Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](https://www.cdc.gov)
- [Utah Department of Health and Human Services](https://www.health.utah.gov)