

Diseases Fact Sheet

South Dakota Department of Health

Office of Disease Prevention Services - 605-773-3737 -(1-800-592-1861 in South Dakota only)

This material is provided for informational purposes only and is not a substitute for medical care. We are not able to answer personal medical questions. Please see your health care provider concerning appropriate care, treatment or other medical advice.

What is it?

Giardiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasite called *Giardia lamblia*. It is a fairly common cause of diarrheal illness. Cases may occur sporadically or in clusters or outbreaks.

Who gets giardiasis?

Anyone can get giardiasis but it tends to occur more often in people in institutional settings, people in day care centers, foreign travelers and individuals who consume improperly treated surface water (i.e., swallowing water while swimming).

How is the parasite spread?

The giardia parasite is passed in the feces of an infected person and may contaminate water or food. Person to person transmission may also occur in day care centers or other settings where hand-washing practices are poor. Animals such as beavers, dogs and cats may also carry giardia.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

People exposed to giardia may experience mild or severe diarrhea, gas, abdominal cramps and greasy stools. Some people have no symptoms. Fever is rarely present. Occasionally, some will have chronic diarrhea over several weeks or months, with significant weight loss.

How soon do symptoms appear?

People may become ill 3 to 25 days after exposure but usually within 10 days.

How long can an infected person carry giardia?

The carrier stage may last from a few weeks to a few months.

Where are the giardia parasites found?

Giardia has been found in infected people (with or without symptoms) and wild and domestic animals. Beavers may be a potential source of giardia contamination of lakes, reservoirs and streams, but human fecal wastes are probably most important.

Should an infected person be excluded from work, school or day care?

People with active diarrhea who are unable to control their bowel habits (infants, young children, certain handicapped individuals, for example) may need to be excluded from settings such as day care or group activities where they may present a risk to others. After they have been treated and have recovered, they should be permitted to return. Individuals who are not in high-risk settings may return to their routine activities when they have recovered, provided that they carefully wash their hands after each toilet visit. The South Dakota Food Service Code states that a food handler with giardiasis must be excluded from work and may return to work when they obtain approval from the regulatory authority or written approval from a physician.

What is the treatment of giardiasis?

Anti-parasitic drugs are often prescribed by doctors to treat giardiasis. However, some individuals may recover on their own without medication.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of giardiasis?

Important preventive measures include:

- Carefully wash hands thoroughly after toilet visits.
- Carefully dispose of sewage wastes so as not to contaminate surface or groundwater.
- Avoid consuming improperly treated drinking water.
- Boil emergency water supplies. Chemical treatment of emergency drinking water is less reliable.
- Hunters, backpackers, hikers and campers should not drink un-boiled water directly from rivers, streams or lakes.

Related Sites:

- [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)
- [Mayo Clinic](#)