

Giardiasis

This leaflet is to tell you about Giardiasis which is the term for an infection with a microscopic single-celled animal called Giardia lamblia. Although you can be infected without knowing it, it can be a long term diarrhoeal illness. It is rare for it to cause complications however, and it is readily treated once recognised.

Now read on.....

How is Giardiasis caught?

The principal sources of the organism are the intestines of humans and, less commonly, animals. Affected humans and animals may be entirely well. Because the number of organisms necessary to cause infection is very small, Giardiasis is easily caught.

Transmission may be direct (e.g. the hands coming into contact with infected faeces and then being put in the mouth) or indirect (e.g. a person or animal contaminates a water source and a person subsequently drinks from that source).

The incubation period (the interval between getting the infection and becoming ill with it) is usually between 5 and 25 days, most commonly 7-10 days.

Giardia can form cysts which are hardy and survive for a long time. These cysts are more likely to be passed out by people who have been infected for some time but who have no symptoms, and do not realise they are infected. Such people do pose a risk of infection to others. In contrast, someone who is actively unwell because of Giardia lamblia will be excreting the fragile form of the organism, which will survive less well in the environment. As a result, overall, 'well' people harbouring Giardia may give a higher risk of infection to others than people who are ill with it.

What are the symptoms of Giardiasis?

Most people harbouring Giardia remain well. Those who get ill have abdominal cramps and diarrhoea and may find their uptake of fats is affected, causing pale and greasy faeces.

Are there any long term complications of Giardiasis?

Occasionally, problems can arise with the pancreas and bile system.

How do you know if you have Giardiasis?

Many different kinds of illnesses can cause diarrhoea or abdominal cramps. Giardiasis can therefore only be diagnosed by examining a stool sample in a laboratory.

Because giardia is often present without causing symptoms, its discovery in someone with no symptoms does not need treatment.

How is Giardiasis treated?

Treatment of giardiasis is straightforward. A short course of antibiotics cures the condition. Once treated, the condition can no longer be passed on.

What can I do to prevent Giardiasis? What can I do if I have it?

There is no vaccine to prevent Giardiasis, nor do you become immune to it longterm. The most important means of avoiding infection is by strict hygiene, particularly after dealing with babies and young children with diarrhoea and after handling animals.

Occasionally, contaminated water is the source of infection and the only sure way to make contaminated water fit to drink is to bring it to the boil. Just bringing water to the boil kills Giardia instantly – there is no need to hold it at the boil.

Giardia is resistant to disinfectants such as ammonia and chlorine.

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