



Whatcom County Health Department

FACT SHEET: GIARDIASIS

What is giardiasis?

Giardia is a one-celled parasite that can cause a gastrointestinal illness caused giardiasis.

Where does it come from?

- Giardia is found in the feces of infected animals or humans.
- To become infected, a person must consume contaminated food or water. This includes water from streams or rivers.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

- Diarrhea, stomach cramps, bloating, gas, fatigue or weight loss. These symptoms may last weeks.
- Infected persons may be contagious for months.

When do symptoms appear?

- About seven to ten days after the organism is ingested.

How is it spread?

- A person can be infected by drinking contaminated water or eating contaminated food or by direct or hand-to-mouth transfer of the bacteria from human or animal feces.
- Many people have no symptoms but can pass the disease on to others if they do not wash their hands after changing diapers or using the toilet.
- Streams or lakes may be contaminated by animal feces and infect swimmers or hikers who drink the contaminated water.

What is the treatment for giardiasis infection?

- The choice of treatment depends on the patient's age and other health factors.
- If you think you or your child have giardiasis, see a health care provider.

Who is at risk?

- Anyone who consumes contaminated food or water is at risk.
- This includes those drinking contaminated water while camping or traveling, child care workers, young children who attend child care centers, persons exposed to human feces by sexual contact, and caregivers who might come in contact with feces while caring for a person infected with giardiasis.
- Children are at greater risk because they put so many things into their mouths.

How common is giardiasis in Washington?

There are typically 700 to 900 cases a year.

How can I ensure my water is safe to drink?

- Pay attention to health advisories and boil water notices.
- Boil untreated water for 2-5 minutes
- Portable water filters can be used by campers to remove giardia from untreated water. Read the label. It must state that the filter is effective for removing giardia.

What should I do if I suspect someone in my family has giardiasis?

Contact your primary health care provider or call your local health department.

