



## PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

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# Amebiasis

### **What is Amebiasis?**

Amebiasis is an infection caused by a protozoan parasite called *Entamoeba histolytica*. This infection can cause a condition called dysentery.

### **What are the symptoms of Amebiasis?**

Many people who are infected have no symptoms, however, a person can carry and spread the parasite for years without symptoms. When symptoms do occur they often include diarrhea, flatulence, stomach cramps, and weight loss. The stool (feces) may contain blood, mucus, or pus. Rarely the parasite spreads to the liver and forms an abscess. It can also spread to other parts of the body, such as the lungs or brain, but this is very uncommon.

### **How is Amebiasis spread?**

The parasites must be swallowed to cause infection. You can get Amebiasis if you swallow food or water that has been infected with the parasite or if you have contact with the stool of a person who is infected. This infection can be sexually transmitted if there is fecal-oral contact.

### **What is the source of Amebiasis?**

Humans and food or water contaminated by human waste are the sources of this infection.

### **How do I know if I have Amebiasis?**

Your health care provider must send a sample of your stool to a laboratory for testing. It may be necessary to do a number of stool tests because *E. histolytica* can be difficult to detect. A blood test is available, but is only recommended if your health care provider thinks that the infection has invaded the wall of the intestines or some other organ of the body.

### **What is the treatment for Amebiasis?**

There are several medications to treat Amebiasis. Treatment is only available by prescription from a health care provider. Infections may require two different types of medication given in sequence to cure the infection.

### **How soon after you come in contact the parasite will infection occur?**

Infections usually occur within one to four weeks after exposure. Sometimes infection may occur in as soon as a few days or as long as a several months after exposure.

### **How long can an infected person carry this parasite?**

A person with Amebiasis may carry this infection for weeks, months, or even years, often without symptoms.

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## How can amebiasis be prevented?

Amebiasis can be prevented by practicing good hygiene and by using caution before eating food or drinking water from an unknown source.

### Some general guidelines are:

- Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water before meals, before preparing food, after using the toilet, after changing diapers or after helping others use the toilet.
- Do not drink untreated water from a surface water supply such as a pond, lake or stream. The water may appear clear but it could be contaminated with human waste. If untreated water is all that is available, it can be boiled for 1 minute to make it safe. Many water purification tablets are not effective against *E. histolytica*.
- Thoroughly wash all fruits and vegetables that are eaten raw.
- If you care for a person with Amebiasis, scrub your hands with plenty of soap and water after contact with the person's stool. Promptly dispose of any material that has been contaminated with stool, and always wash your hands after such contact.
- Travelers to areas of poor sanitation should be aware of the risk of this infection and should only drink water or use ice from a source known to be free of contamination. They should avoid eating unpasteurized milk or dairy products, which can be contaminated with unclean water. They should not eat uncooked fruits unless they can peel them themselves and not eat salads or raw vegetables. They should also not eat foods purchased from street vendors.
- Men who have sex with men should be aware of the risk of infection and may wish to avoid sexual practices that involve fecal-oral contact. If symptoms occur, advice from a health care provider should be sought. Infected persons should advise contacts to be evaluated and treated if necessary to minimize the risk of spread and re-infection.

### Are there any health regulations for people with Amebiasis?

Yes. Because Amebiasis can be spread from person to person, health care providers and laboratories are required to report cases to local boards of health.

In order to protect the public, workers in food-related businesses who have Amebiasis must stay out of work until diarrhea has resolved and a stool sample for Amebiasis is negative. Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, supermarkets, dairies, food processing plants, and others. This regulation also includes workers in schools, residential programs, day-care and health care facilities who feed, give mouth care or dispense medication to clients.

**For more information, please contact  
Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control  
(617) 534-5611 or [www.bphc.org](http://www.bphc.org)**