



## PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

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# Diarrheal Illness

### What are diarrheal illnesses?

Diarrheal illnesses are caused by germs (bacteria, parasites, or viruses) that grow in the intestines (bowels) and are passed out of the body in the stools. Anyone can get diarrheal illnesses and they can be caught over and over. People with these germs in their stools may not have diarrhea or feel sick. Lab tests are the only way to tell if someone's stool contains germs.

### How do diarrheal illnesses spread?

When people do not wash their hands well after using the toilet, changing diapers, or helping a child use the toilet germs too small to be seen stay on their hands and the child's hands. The germs can then be spread to anything they touch (including food, drinks, and toys) and then to other people's hands and mouths. The germs are then swallowed by other people where they grow and cause an infection. Diarrheal diseases can spread easily among children because it is normal for them to get their hands into everything and many are too young to wash their hands well.

### How are diarrheal illnesses diagnosed?

Some of these diseases can be diagnosed by looking at the stool under a microscope, some by growing the germs in at the lab, others by chemical lab tests. Since the germs are usually passed in the stools off and on, stool samples from several days may need to be checked.

### How do you stop the spread of these diseases?

- Be sure everyone washes their hands with soap and water *after* using the toilet, helping a child use the toilet, or changing a diaper, and *before* preparing or eating food. Babies and children need to have their hands washed too at these times. A quick rinse is **not** enough, be sure to wash hands with warm water and soap for at least 15 seconds.
- If someone in your household gets diarrhea, you may want to talk to your healthcare provider. This is especially important if someone in your household handles or prepares food as a job.
- Most people with diarrheal illnesses do not need medicine. Symptoms usually resolve in 2-5 days. If you have blood in your stool (bowel) or symptoms persist or are severe, you should talk with your healthcare provider. Your healthcare provider will decide if you or other household members need to be treated.

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