



## **PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET**

Boston Public Health Commission  
Communicable Disease Control Division  
1010 Massachusetts Avenue  
Boston, MA 02118  
Phone: 617-534-5611 Fax: 617-534-5905

# **Giardia**

### **What is giardia?**

Giardia is a parasite that causes a disease that affects the stomach and bowels. This germ is a common cause of diarrhea in the United States.

### **What are the symptoms?**

The most common symptoms are diarrhea, foul-smelling soft stools, abdominal cramps, bloating, increased gas, weakness, loss of appetite, and weight loss. Symptoms of giardia usually appear seven to ten days after exposure to the parasite. Sometimes it takes as long as four weeks for symptoms to appear. The symptoms may come and go for weeks in a person who is not treated.

### **Do all people who get infected with giardia get sick?**

No. Some people who are infected with the parasite only have minor symptoms and some people may not have any symptoms at all.

### **How is giardia spread?**

The parasites must be swallowed to cause disease. You can get giardia infection if you swallow food or water that is contaminated with the germ. Giardia is often spread when people do not wash their hands with soap and water after using the toilet or changing a diaper.

People who get the germs on their hands can infect themselves by eating, smoking, or touching their mouths. They can also spread the germs to things they touch, including food, which can make others sick. The giardia parasites are mainly spread from person to person such as in day-care centers.

### **Can animals spread giardia?**

Giardia parasites can be found in the stools of many animals, including rodents, dogs, cattle, and wild animals. Animals living near water supplies, such as beavers, and muskrats, have been found to be infected with giardia. You can get giardia by drinking water contaminated with the feces of these animals.

### **How can you know for sure if you have giardia?**

Your healthcare provider must send your stool sample to a laboratory. The laboratory will look at the sample using a microscope or other test to see if there are any giardia parasites in it. Giardia can also be diagnosed by a laboratory test of a sample of fluid or a biopsy from the small intestine.

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### **How can I prevent giardia?**

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, and after handling your pets.
- Do not drink untreated water from a surface water supply, such as a pond, lake, or stream.
- If you are taking care of a person with giardia, scrub your hands with soap and water after contact with the person's stool (for example, after changing diapers). Promptly and carefully dispose of any material that has been contaminated with stool, and always wash your hands after such contact.
- If your source of drinking water is a private well or a private surface water supply, do not allow humans or animals to defecate (have bowel movements) near the water. Consider periodic testing of water from private sources to ensure that it is safe.

### **Are there any health regulations for people with giardia?**

Yes. Because giardia is a disease that is easily spread to other people, health care providers are required by law to report cases of giardia to the Boston Public Health Commission. In order to protect the public, workers at food-related businesses who have giardiasis must stay out of work until they don't have diarrhea and a lab test on a stool sample shows that there are no giardia parasites.

Food-related businesses include restaurants, sandwich shops, hospital kitchens, supermarkets, dairy or food processing plants. This regulation also includes workers in schools, residential programs, and day-care and health care facilities who feed, give mouth care or dispense medications 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)**