

Giardiasis

What is giardiasis?

Giardia (say gee-ar-dee-ah) is the name of a microscopic parasite that can live in the human bowel. The sickness that this parasite causes is called giardiasis (say gee-ar-dye-a-sis). Some symptoms of giardiasis are diarrhea, belching, gas and cramps. Although these problems are very unpleasant, the illness isn't usually dangerous.

How does a person get this disease?

Giardiasis is easy to catch if you drink spring water or stream water. Many animals carry *Giardia* in their feces and may introduce this parasite into rivers, streams and springs in rural areas. Infected stream water may look clean and safe when it really isn't. City water may also be infected if sewer lines flood or leak. If you travel overseas, you may get giardiasis by drinking water (even tap water) that hasn't been boiled or treated.

Some people who get giardiasis don't become ill, but they may spread the parasite to other people. Giardiasis may be spread in day care centers if workers aren't careful to wash their hands each time after changing diapers.

How can this disease be prevented?

You should be very careful about the water you drink. If you go camping, take bottled water or boil water before you use it. Wash your hands carefully several times a day (with an antibacterial soap, if possible). If you are traveling, don't brush your teeth or wash dishes with water that hasn't been boiled. Peel raw fruits and vegetables before you eat them, and don't eat undercooked food. If someone in your family gets giardiasis, it's likely that this problem will spread to everyone in your home—especially to the children.

How can my doctor tell if I have this disease?

Your doctor usually diagnoses giardiasis by looking at stool samples under a microscope, although several samples may have to be checked before the diagnosis can be made. Sometimes other tests may be necessary.

How is this disease treated?

Giardiasis is usually treated with a medicine called metronidazole (Flagyl). It's usually taken three times a day for five to 10 days. Side effects may include a metallic taste in the mouth or nausea. If you take Flagyl, you should not drink any alcohol. This medicine shouldn't be taken in the early stages of pregnancy.

Young children (under five years old) may be treated with furazolidone (Furoxone). This medicine has fewer side effects and comes in a liquid form, but it shouldn't be given to babies younger than one month old.

It's usually best if a whole family is treated at the same time, because giardiasis is so easily spread. In most cases, your doctor will want to check a stool sample after the treatment, to be sure the medicine worked. Sometimes you may need to take medicine for a longer time, or your doctor may want you to take another medicine for a complete cure.

This handout provides a general overview on this topic and may not apply to everyone. To find out if this handout applies to you and to get more information on this subject, talk to your family doctor.



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