

Giardia

Giardia is a type of parasite that can cause diarrhoea (runny poo), stomach pains and vomiting. People become infected when they swallow the parasite, usually from contact with or drinking contaminated water. You can be infected with the illness in New Zealand. It is more common in rural areas, as well as places with lakes and nearby farmyard animals.



How does giardia spread

Giardia is a food and water-borne disease caused by swallowing the giardia parasite. This most often occurs when people drink unsafe (contaminated) water.

People or animals who have giardia can pass on the parasites in their poo (faeces). These can then contaminate soil, food or water, or surfaces such as toys, bathroom taps or doors, and nappy change tables.

The parasite can live in the environment for long periods, especially in lakes, rivers, streams and roof water. There is no way of telling by taste, sight or smell if soil, food, water or a surface has giardia parasites in it or on it.



Signs and symptoms

Symptoms may include:

- diarrhoea (runny poo)
- stomach pains
- feeling or being sick.

Symptoms can appear three to 25 days after someone has been infected.

The illness typically lasts three to four days. Sometimes people feel better temporarily but then the symptoms come back again.

If you don't have treatment you may get recurring symptoms and could be at risk of passing on giardia to others for months.

If you have symptoms

- Contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.
- Your doctor may request a faeces (poo) sample for testing.
- This is the only way to confirm if you have the illness.

People with giardia can be treated with antibiotics. These help you clear the infection from your body, so that you can recover and no longer risk passing on the illness to others.

Restrictions

If you have giardia you are at risk of passing on the infection to others.

You should stay home from work, school or day care until you have been free of diarrhoea symptoms for at least 48 hours (2 days).

It's important to practice good hand hygiene, to reduce the risk of passing on the infection to others. Wash hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel every time:

- after going to the toilet
- before preparing food, eating or drinking
- after changing babies nappies.

You should also avoid using public swimming pools until at least two weeks after your symptoms have gone away.

If you or a child are unwell then do not share bathwater, as this can easily pass on the infection.



Prevention

You can reduce the risk of getting giardia and passing it on to others by following simple precautions.

Safe drinking water

- Avoid drinking water that has not been treated – including water from lakes, rivers or streams, or from an area where you don't know the quality of source water.
- If you have to drink untreated water that is taken from a roof, river or lake (eg, in a rural area), it should be boiled for at least 1 minute or treated.
- Consider adding a water treatment filter to your water tank if you live somewhere rural.

When tramping and camping

- Use toilets if they are available.
- If there are no toilets, bury your toilet waste and paper. Make sure you bury it at least 50 metres away from water sources, such as rivers, lakes or springs.
- Do not wash your hands directly in a water source. Collect water in a clean container, wash your hands with soap and water and then drain used water into the ground away from the water source.



For more information

- healthnz.govt.nz/giardia
- If you are concerned about giardia call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116 or contact your doctor or practice nurse.