

Shigella

Shigella is a type of bacteria that infects your bowel (digestive system) causing diarrhoea and vomiting. The disease is also referred to as “shigellosis” or “dysentery”. It can be especially dangerous for babies, very young children and older people.

There are multiple types of shigella infections. Some can cause serious disease and complications, while others are only associated with a mild illness. If you have shigella symptoms you may have a test to check if you have the disease and what type it is.

People from New Zealand are most likely to be infected with shigella while travelling in developing countries, through eating or drinking unsafe (contaminated) food and water. Within New Zealand shigella is most commonly spread amongst children in day care and school.



How does shigella spread

People who have shigella can pass the germ out of their body in their poo (faeces). If you then eat food or drink water that's contaminated with bacteria from the infected poo you can become infected too.

You can also get it from contact with items contaminated by the poo (faeces), such as surfaces, toys and door handles.

Flies can also spread shigella bacteria by flying from human faeces to uncovered food.



Signs and symptoms

Symptoms can include:

- diarrhoea
- upset stomach and vomiting
- sometimes people also get blood in their faeces (poo).

Symptoms usually start one to three days after you are infected, but can occur any time up to seven days later. Symptoms tend to last for four to seven days.

If you think you could have shigella contact your doctor and explain what your symptoms are. You can also call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.

If your doctor thinks you have shigella you will need to provide a faeces sample for testing.

If you have shigella you may be given antibiotics to fight the infection, although over time most people tend to clear the infection from their body naturally. You will also need to rest and should drink plenty of water so you do not become dehydrated (when your body does not have enough fluids or salts to function properly).



Restrictions

If you have shigella you are at risk of infecting others. You will need to stay home from school, work or daycare.

How long you need to stay home will depend on what sub type of shigella you have, and whether you attend day care or work in a high-risk job (which includes health care, food preparation and day care centre employees).

If you have shigella sonnei

You can return after you have been symptom free for at least 48 hours.

If you have another type of shigella AND

- you attend day care OR
- work in a high risk job

Once you are symptom free you will need to have further tests on your faeces before you can return.

These tests take place 48 hours after you have completed any antibiotics course. Two tests are required, at least 48 hours apart. If these are both negative you can return.

If you have another type of shigella AND

- × you do not attend day care OR
- × you do not work in a high risk job

You can return after you have been symptom free for at least 48 hours.



What do close contacts need to do?

People you live with or have had close contact with may also need to have a test on their faeces, depending on what type of Shigella you have. If they have a test and work in a high-risk job or attend day care they will need to stay away until they receive a negative test result.



Protecting yourself and others

Handwashing

To stop the spread of shigella you should wash your hands with soapy water for 20 seconds, then dry well with a clean cloth or paper towel:

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

Other precautions

To prevent the spread of shigella you should also:

- avoid sharing food, drinks, spoons and straws
- not use a pool or swim in a pond while sick if you have diarrhoea – you should wait until at least two weeks after your symptoms have gone away
- be extra careful around babies and small children, even if they are in nappies.

Travel advice

If you are travelling to countries where shigella is more common you can reduce your risk of infection by:

- avoiding unsafe drinking water, including ice and drinks mixed with water
- only drinking bottled and boiled water
- avoiding food from street stalls
- ensuring hot food is well cooked, and eaten while it's still hot
- ensuring you wash and dry your hands after going to the toilet and before preparing food or eating and drinking.

Visit www.safetravel.govt.nz for more information on health advice when traveling abroad.



For more information

- healthnz.govt.nz/shigellosis

For health advice contact your doctor, or call Healthline for free on 0800 611 116.