

Giardiasis

What is Giardiasis?

Giardiasis is a diarrhoeal illness caused by a protozoan parasite and is a common cause of infectious diarrhoea. The disease occurs world-wide (including the UK and the United States) and incidence is higher in areas where there is a lack of basic sanitation.

How is it spread?

Giardia infection is associated with ingestion of contaminated water. Food borne outbreaks do occur, but are less common. Person to person transmission also occurs, particularly between small children in day care facilities, and amongst men who have sex with men.

Signs and Symptoms:

The majority of cases are asymptomatic, but in those that do experience clinical illness the incubation period is between 1 and 3 weeks, and therefore symptoms may begin after a traveller has returned home.

The most common symptoms are diarrhoea, accompanied by abdominal cramps, bloating, nausea, anorexia and weight loss. Less common symptoms include vomiting and fever.

Symptoms often last for more than 10 days and sometimes longer than a month.

Treatment:

Persons who have appropriate risk factors and a prolonged diarrhoeal illness often with weight loss should be suspected of having giardiasis. A confirmed diagnosis can be made by a stool examination and testing.

Giardiasis responds promptly to treatment when treated appropriately.

Lactose intolerance and an irritable-bowel like syndrome can occur following giardiasis and should be distinguished from relapse of the infection.

Tips for treating Diarrhoea:

- Drink plenty of safe fluids (avoid alcohol)
- Use oral rehydration sachets
- See a doctor if diarrhoea is bloody, persistent or associated with fever.

Prevention:

There is no vaccine or tablet to take to prevent Giardia. Travellers should be advised to observe food and water hygiene practices.

Giardia intestinalis parasites are moderately resistant to chlorine levels found in drinking water, and if there has been a faecal accident in a swimming pool, swimmers may become infected. Travellers should therefore be advised to avoid swallowing water whilst swimming and refrain from using swimming pools if experiencing diarrhoea.

Some water purification products are effective against giardia. Ask your travel health adviser about these.