

Giardiasis

What is giardiasis and what causes it?

Giardiasis (gee-are-DYE-uh-sis) is caused by a one-celled, microscopic protozoan called ***Giardia intestinalis*** (gee-are-DEE-ah in-TES-tin-al-is). The parasite is found in the intestine of infected people or animals and is passed in large numbers in the stool. The parasite is protected by an outer shell allowing it to survive outside the body and in the environment for long periods of time. Giardiasis occurs worldwide and is particularly common in warm climates. It causes diarrhea in a wide variety of species.

What animals get giardiasis?

Giardiasis infection occurs in a wide variety of domestic and wild mammal species including dogs, cats, cattle, sheep, goats, horses, pigs, beavers, coyotes, non-human primates, rodents, and raccoons.

How can my animal get giardiasis?

Giardia are found in soil, food, water, or surfaces that have been contaminated with the feces from infected humans or animals. Infection occurs after accidentally **ingesting** the parasite.

How does giardiasis affect my animal?

Most animals with giardiasis show no signs of disease. Diarrhea can occur, most commonly in younger animals. Soft stools, a poor hair coat, intestinal gas, weight loss or failure to gain weight can also be seen. The stools are light-colored, contain mucus (clear slime) and may contain undigested fat (white, greasy spots).

Can I get giardiasis?

Yes. Anyone can get giardiasis. Exposure most commonly occurs through **ingestion** of the parasite in contaminated water or food. It can also be spread by contact with fecal material from infected people (hand-to-hand or hand-to-mouth). This may be a more common route for infants and children.

Giardiasis is also a frequent cause of traveler's diarrhea. Hikers, backpackers and campers who drink unfiltered or untreated water are more likely to get infected.

People with giardiasis may have no signs of illness while others may experience diarrhea, intestinal gas, stomach cramps, and nausea. The disease usually clears up on its own in a few months.

Who should I contact, if I suspect giardiasis?

In Animals –

Contact your veterinarian.

In Humans –

Contact your physician.

How can I protect my animals from giardiasis?

Pets and livestock can be infected from unsafe water sources such as lakes, streams, springs and shallow wells. Prompt removal of feces and cleaning and disinfecting pet areas can limit environmental contamination. Keeping pets indoors can decrease the risk of getting infected. Vaccines are available for dogs and cats but their use is very limited.

How can I protect myself from giardiasis?

To prevent infection, do not drink (or accidentally swallow) untreated water from lakes, rivers, streams, springs or shallow wells. In countries where the water supply may not be safe, untreated drinking water or ice should be avoided.

All raw vegetables or fruits should be washed before eating in water known to be uncontaminated. Good hygiene, such as hand washing, can help prevent infection and reduce spreading giardiasis to other people.

For More Information

CFSPH Technical Fact Sheets. Giardiasis at <http://www.cfsph.iastate.edu/DiseaseInfo/default.htm>

CDC website. Giardia at <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/giardia/>

