

# Cryptosporidiosis

## *Cryptosporidium* Infection

### Public Health – Factsheet

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#### What is cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis is an intestinal illness (affecting the stomach and bowels), caused by the tiny parasite *Cryptosporidium*. This parasite can live in the stomach and bowels of humans and animals. Those infected with cryptosporidiosis can pass the illness to others through their feces (stool, poop).

The parasite is protected by an outer shell, which allows it to survive outside the body for long periods of time. This makes the parasite difficult to kill with common disinfectants like chlorine.

#### What are the symptoms of cryptosporidiosis?

Symptoms include continuous watery diarrhea, stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, mild fever and dehydration. As well, it's not unusual for people to have the illness and **not** show any symptoms.

#### Who is most at risk for a serious case of cryptosporidiosis?

The people most at risk for any serious illness are those with weak immune systems. They include people living with HIV or cancer, and transplant patients receiving drugs that weaken their immune systems.

#### When do the symptoms start and how long do they last?

Symptoms can start one to 12 days after contact with the parasite. Most people start feeling sick seven days after becoming infected, and symptoms usually last one to two weeks. In some cases, symptoms can return after a person has recovered.

#### How do people get cryptosporidiosis?

Eating or drinking contaminated (spoiled, tainted) food or water is the most common way to get cryptosporidiosis. However, you can also contract the disease through direct contact with the poop of

infected humans or animals (domestic and wild), if you don't wash your hands properly and thoroughly, directly after contact. Outbreaks usually occur when entire water systems become contaminated.

#### How is cryptosporidiosis spread?

It is spread by the fecal-oral (poop to mouth) route. This happens when poop from infected humans or animals gets into our mouths by:

- eating or drinking contaminated food or water
- changing diapers of an infected child, or caring for someone with diarrhea and not following up with proper hand-washing
- making contact with the poop of domestic or wild animals – including pets (litter boxes, birdcages) and farm animals (ex: cow pastures, chicken coops) – without washing hands thoroughly afterwards
- having anal-genital sex

While most outbreaks happen because of contaminated drinking water, others have been linked to:

- child care centres
- recreational water – for swimming, boating, etc. (ex: swimming pools, waterslides, lakes)
- travel
- contact with farm animals

#### What should I do if I think I have cryptosporidiosis?

See your doctor immediately for testing, advice and treatment.

#### How is it diagnosed? (How do they know it's cryptosporidiosis?)

A sample of your stool (poop) is sent to a lab, which uses special methods to identify the parasite. If a *Cryptosporidium* parasite is found in your poop, you have the illness.

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## How is the illness treated?

Most people with cryptosporidiosis will get better without any special treatment. At this time, there are no drugs available to kill the parasite, but your doctor will give you advice on how to treat your symptoms.

People with cryptosporidiosis should drink plenty of clear fluids (ex: water, clear juices and soups) to prevent dehydration, caused by diarrhea. Resting and eating foods that are easy to digest (ex: bananas, rice, soft crackers) will help you get better.

## How can I protect myself from cryptosporidiosis?

Here are some ways to lower your chances of getting cryptosporidiosis:

- Wash your hands with soap and water before and after:
  - using or cleaning the toilet, or helping someone else use the toilet
  - changing diapers
  - caring for someone who is ill with diarrhea
  - eating or preparing foods
  - handling animals (ex: pets, farm animals, wild animals)
- Watch young children who touch, or play with, animals (ex: pets, petting zoos). Make sure they are washing their hands properly afterwards, and not putting their hands in their mouths.
- Make sure your drinking water is safe and that the water supply is not contaminated by human or animal poop.
- Avoid drinking untreated water (ex: water from lakes, rivers, springs, ponds).
- If travelling in places where the water supply may be unsafe, you should:
  - drink bottled water
  - stay away from drinks with ice
  - don't eat uncooked foods that are washed with regular tap water (that isn't boiled)
- Avoid sexual practices that could put you at risk of getting infected.

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*Cryptosporidium* is not killed by alcohol gels or hand sanitizers.

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**Think about others.  
Don't pass it on.**

## If I get cryptosporidiosis, how do I avoid passing it on to others?

All people with cryptosporidiosis should wash their hands often. This is especially important after going to the toilet and before handling food. Don't get close to anyone with a weak immune system. It's important to realize that when you're sick, you can make other people sick too.

If you have diarrhea, stay away from recreational water (ex: swimming pools, wading pools, whirlpools) until **two weeks after** the symptoms have gone away.

## Are there certain jobs where the infection can be passed on more easily?

Yes. If you work in a job where you handle food or come in close contact with others (ex: kitchens or restaurants, hospitals, child care centres, personal care homes), and you come down with cryptosporidiosis, you should **not** return to work until your symptoms are gone.

## What about child care? If my child becomes ill with cryptosporidiosis, can I send them anyway?

If your child has watery diarrhea, we recommend that you **do not** send your child to daycare until the diarrhea has stopped.

## For more information:

Talk to your doctor, health care provider or local public health office.

Call Health Links-Info Santé at 204-788-8200 (in Winnipeg); toll free 1-888-315-9257 (outside Winnipeg).

Visit **Manitoba Health's website** at [www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/diseases/cryptosporidium.html](http://www.gov.mb.ca/health/publichealth/diseases/cryptosporidium.html).