

## Giardiasis

### Summary

Giardiasis is a parasitic intestinal disease that may result in asymptomatic infection; acute, self-limited diarrhea; or chronic intermittent symptoms. The disease is primarily spread from person-to-person or through ingestion of contaminated water. Symptoms can include frequent loose stools (no blood), dull epigastric pain, foul/greasy stools, and flatulence. Some individuals experience chronic intermittent diarrhea, weight loss, bloating, or stomach cramps. Infection is diagnosed by direct examination of stool or by stool antigen detection. There are several antiparasitic agents available to treat giardiasis. Control measures include good hand hygiene practices and avoiding drinking untreated water.

### Agent

*Giardia duodenalis* (formerly known as *G. lamblia* and *G. intestinalis*) is a flagellated protozoan parasite.

### Transmission

#### Reservoir:

This enteric parasite affects humans and a range of domestic and wild animals (e.g., cats, dogs, cattle, deer, beavers, etc.).

#### Transmission:

- Fecal-oral transmission occurs from the ingestion of *Giardia* cysts through the consumption of contaminated food or water. This accounts for many cases reported in international travelers, wilderness travelers, and swimmers who drink untreated/improperly treated water.
- Community-wide outbreaks have occurred when municipal systems have become contaminated or when filtration systems have been bypassed or broken.
- Direct person-to-person (fecal-oral) transmission may occur when cysts in feces of an infected person are passed hand to mouth to an uninfected person. This is probably the most common mode of spread among children, especially for toddlers in diapers. The prevalence of infection is highest in areas of poor sanitation and in institutions (including childcare centers).
- Transmission may also occur during sexual activity, particularly oral-anal contact.

#### Period of Communicability:

The period of communicability is as long as the organism is excreted in stool. The infectious dose is small: ingestion of 10 cysts has been reported to cause infection. Infected people have been reported to shed 1-10 billion cysts in their stool daily and this might last for several weeks or months.

- Symptomatic giardiasis in adults usually lasts from 2 weeks to 2 months.
- Chronic giardiasis, usually only found among those who are immunocompromised, may persist for many months to years.
- Asymptomatic carriage and shedding of *Giardia* may persist for months.

### Clinical Disease

Incubation period:

Usually 1-3 weeks

Illness:

- Asymptomatic infection is common (in approximately 60%) and may occur more frequently in children or in people with prior infections. Symptomatic patients have diarrhea (~2-5 stools/day) with loose, foul-smelling stools **without blood or fever** typically lasting 2-6 weeks.
- A more protracted diarrheal illness can occur with symptoms of flatulence, abdominal distention, cramps, fatigue, and anorexia. There can be malabsorption leading to significant weight loss and dehydration. These symptoms can persist for several weeks.
- Symptoms can persist weeks to months following clearance of infection (e.g., residual lactose intolerance is common).
- "Less common symptoms include fever, itchy skin, hives, and swelling of the eyes and joints" as reported by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and some "will have long-term complications such as reactive arthritis, irritable bowel syndrome, and recurring diarrhea that can last for years. Among children in particular, severe giardiasis may delay physical and mental growth, slow development, and cause malnutrition."

### Laboratory Diagnosis

Laboratory-confirmed giardiasis is defined as the detection (in symptomatic or asymptomatic persons) of *Giardia* cysts or trophozoites in stool specimens, duodenal fluid, or small-bowel tissue by microscopic examination using staining methods (e.g., trichrome), direct fluorescent antibody (DFA) assays, or antigens in stool specimens by immunodiagnostic testing (e.g. enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay). Tests using enzyme immunoassay (EIA) or immunofluorescent antibody (IFA) methods for detection of *Giardia* antigen in the stool (or duodenal fluid) are commercially available and are generally more sensitive than direct microscopy.

Because excretion of the cysts can be sporadic, the sensitivity of stool examination can be improved by repeat testing (generally up to three separate stool samples, ~24 hours apart). To enhance detection, stool exams should be done shortly after collection, or stool should be placed in a fixative.

**Note: Scientific Lab Division (SLD) no longer provides transport media for ova and parasite (O and P) exams nor does it do any stool testing for *Giardia*.**

Culture Independent Diagnostic Testing (CIDT) is becoming a common method for diagnoses. CIDT is a PCR test with approximately 1-hour turnaround time, which makes it appealing; however, the PCR is run as a GI panel and often results in detection of several conditions at the same time. Investigations are needed to confirm all results.

CDC reports that "microscopy with direct fluorescent antibody testing (DFA) is considered the test of choice [gold standard] for diagnosis of giardiasis since it provides increased sensitivity over non-fluorescent microscopy techniques."

### Treatment

All treatment decisions should be made in consultation with the patient's healthcare provider.

- Empiric treatment may be considered depending upon history and severity of symptoms while definitive lab results are pending.
-

- Choice of agent and timing of treatment may depend upon several factors including age of patient, pregnancy, breastfeeding, and/or immune status.
- Unless contraindicated, metronidazole, tinidazole, or nitroimidazole are the drugs of choice. Cure rates range from 80-100% depending on the agent used.
- If symptoms persist, consider re-testing to confirm infection. If treatment failure or re-infection occurs, treatment can be repeated with a longer course of the same drug, an alternative drug of a different class, or a combined regimen. Relapse is common in immunocompromised patients who may require prolonged treatment.
- Treatment of asymptomatic carriers is controversial but recommended in the US to prevent infection within families or other children.

### Surveillance

Laboratory criteria: demonstration of *Giardia* cysts or trophozoites, antigen, or DNA in stool, intestinal fluid, or tissue/biopsy samples.

- **Confirmed** – A case that is laboratory confirmed and meets the clinical description.
- **Probable** – A clinically compatible case that is epidemiologically linked to a confirmed case.

Reporting:

**Report all suspected, probable, or confirmed cases of giardiasis to the Center for Health Protection (CHP) at 505-827-0006.** Information needed includes: patient's name, age, sex, race, ethnicity, home address, home phone number, occupation, and healthcare provider. If applicable, report possible exposure information such as recent contact with animals (e.g., at a petting zoo) or use of recreational water (e.g., swimming pool).

Case Investigation:

Use the Foodborne Surveillance Investigation Form to complete the investigation. Information should also be entered into NM-EDSS per established procedures.

### Control Measures

Control measures for CIDT cases that tested positive for more than one condition should be prioritized as follows:

*Vibrio*> *STEC*> *Cryptosporidium*> *Salmonella*> *Shigella*> *Campylobacter*> *Cyclospora*> ***Giardia***

For a summary of work and daycare exclusion criteria for all enteric pathogens, see [Appendix 8](#).

#### 1. Case management

##### 1.1. Isolation:

- 1.1.a Exclude **symptomatic** persons from food handling, and from direct care of infants, elderly, immunocompromised, and hospitalized or institutionalized patients. People may be allowed to resume usual duties when:
  - Diarrhea has resolved, **and**
  - Proper hygiene measures can be maintained (as assessed by a food sanitarian, trained environmentalist, or infection control practitioner).

- In the instance of a food handler, contact the Environment Department's district food program; in the case of a healthcare worker, contact the facility's infection preventionist to assess the risk for transmission.

1.1.b Exclusion of **asymptomatic** infected people from food handling, and from direct care of infants, elderly, immunocompromised, and hospitalized or institutionalized patients may be indicated if their food handling or personal hygiene habits (as assessed by a food sanitarian, trained environmentalist, or infection preventionist) are inadequate to prevent transmission of enteric infection to patrons or patients. They need not be excluded from work if proper hygiene measures are maintained.

1.1.c For hospitalized or institutionalized patients, *Giardia* requires standard precautions. For diapered or incontinent patients including children less than 6 years of age, *Giardia* requires the additional use of contact precautions.

1.2. Prophylaxis: Not applicable.

## 2. Contact management

Isolation: Household or other close contacts should have their stool examined for *Giardia* if they are symptomatic. Because of intermittent shedding, **three negative specimens taken at least 24 hours apart** should be obtained to rule out infection. Exclude symptomatic contacts from food handling.

2.1. Prophylaxis: Not applicable.

## 3. Prevention

3.1. Emphasize good hand hygiene practices (e.g., proper hand washing after using the toilet, changing diapers, and before and after handling food).

3.2. Travelers, backpackers, campers, and other people at risk of exposure to contaminated water should avoid drinking water directly from surface water sources (e.g., lakes, rivers, streams). Boiling water for at least one minute will kill the infective cysts.

3.3. Prevent contact and contamination with feces during sex by using a barrier (e.g., condom) during oral-anal sex, and washing hands immediately after either handling a condom used during anal sex or after touching the anus or rectal area.

3.4. To prevent the contamination of recreational waters, do not swim when ill with diarrhea (children should avoid recreational water activities for one week after cessation of symptoms).

3.5. Immunization: Not applicable.

## Management of *Giardia* in Childcare Centers

1. People with diarrhea should be excluded from childcare until they are asymptomatic.
2. Per childcare licensing regulations, a center should notify parents or guardians in writing of a case of *Giardia* in the facility. See [Appendix 7](#) for a template of a notification letter.
3. If an outbreak is suspected, contact **CHP** at 1-833-796-8773. An investigation will be undertaken to identify and treat all symptomatic children, childcare center staff, and family members infected with *Giardia*. Exclusion of asymptomatic carriers from childcare is not recommended. Testing and treatment of asymptomatic people in a childcare center outbreak is controversial.



4. The childcare center should review its infection control protocols with staff, and emphasize the following:
  - Standard precautions should be followed. Strict hand-washing routines for staff and children as well as routines for handling fecally contaminated materials.
  - Frequently mouthed objects should be cleaned and sanitized daily. Items should be washed with dishwashing detergent and water, then rinsed in freshly prepared household bleach solution (dilute 1 cup bleach in 9 cups of water) daily.
  - Food-handling and diaper-changing areas should be physically separated and cleaned daily.
  - Diaper changing surfaces should be nonporous and cleaned with a freshly prepared household bleach solution (dilute 1 cup bleach in 9 cups of water) daily. Cleaning diaper-changing surfaces **after each use** is required; diapers should be disposed of properly. If available, nonporous gloves should be worn when changing diapers.
  - Ideally, institute and maintain a system of stool monitoring (i.e., diaper logs) for all infants and children who are not toilet-trained.
    - Diaper logs are not required by regulation but are recommended whenever a day care attendee is diagnosed with an enteric pathogen.
    - The purpose of the log is to assist in the identification of potential new cases, to prioritize testing recommendations, and assist in determining if exclusion of the infant or child is necessary until infection can be ruled out.
    - At a minimum, diaper logs should document the quality (e.g., formed, loose, watery, blood present, mucus present) and time of each diaper change.
    - The log should be reviewed **each day** with the center director, or their designated personnel, and personnel from NMDOH who are being consulted and/or investigating individual cases, clusters, or outbreaks at the center.
  - Animals in the childcare center with diarrhea should be isolated from children and taken to a veterinarian for diagnosis and treatment.

## References

American Academy of Pediatrics. In: Kimberlin, DW, et al eds. Red Book: 2024 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases. Itasca, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2024.

Centers for Disease Control and prevention. Last reviewed 3/1/2021, cited 6/21/23. [Diagnosis and Treatment Information for Medical Professionals | Giardia | Parasites | CDC.](#)

Centers for Disease Control and prevention. Last reviewed 4/16/2021, cited 4/10/2025. Giardiasis 2011 Case Definition. <https://ndc.services.cdc.gov/case-definitions/giardiasis-2011/>

Heymann, DL, ed. Control of Communicable Diseases Manual. 19<sup>th</sup> edition. Washington, DC: American Public Health Association; 2008.

Hlavsa, M.C., Watson, J.C., Beach, M.J. Giardiasis Surveillance --- United States, 1998—2002. In: Surveillance Summaries, January 28, 2005. MMWR 2005: 54(SS01); 9-16

Ortega YR, Adam RD. *Giardia*: Overview and Update. Clin Inf Dis 1997; 25:545-550.

See Giardiasis Fact Sheets ([English](#)) ([Spanish](#))