

Amebiasis

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis (pronounced am-e-BY-a-sis) is an illness caused by a parasite called *Entamoeba histolytica*. This parasite is found across Canada and throughout the world.

What are the symptoms of amebiasis?

Most people who are infected with this parasite do not have symptoms or are only mildly sick. The symptoms may include chills, fever, cramps, diarrhea or constipation. The symptoms last about three weeks.

Symptoms usually appear 2-4 weeks from the time of swallowing the parasite. Sometimes people will get sick a few days to several months after their exposure. A person may pass the infection to others even if they are not sick with symptoms. They may continue to pass the infection in their stool for several months.

Amebic dysentery is a severe form of amebiasis that can cause stomach pain, bloody diarrhea and fever.

How do I get infected with amebiasis?

The parasite is spread person to person by the fecal-oral route. This means the parasite is found in the form of a cyst in the stool of an infected person. If another person swallows the cysts, they can get infected.

This can happen in a variety of ways:

- Drinking contaminated water, especially in countries with poor sanitation.
- Swallowing contaminated water, which may be found in swimming pools, lakes, rivers or streams.
- Eating contaminated food. Food can become contaminated if it is prepared by an infected person who did not wash their hands properly after using the bathroom. Fruits and vegetables can become contaminated if fertilized with water containing human waste.
- Touching contaminated surfaces and then putting your fingers in your mouth.
- Sexual transmission can also happen through oral-anal sex.

Am I at risk?

Anyone can get amebiasis, but it is more common in people who live in or travel to countries with poor sanitary conditions. It is usually found in young adults. Children under the age of five rarely get this infection. About 1 in 10 of the world's population is infected with this parasite.

What is the treatment for amebiasis?

There are prescription drugs available to treat amebiasis. See your doctor if you think you may have this infection. It is diagnosed with a stool test.

How can I prevent amebiasis?

- Washing your hands well is the best prevention. Make sure you wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet, changing diapers and before preparing and eating food.
- Wash and peel all fruits and vegetables before eating. Disinfectant washes for fruits and vegetables have not been proven to prevent the spread of this parasite. When travelling in developing countries, only eat raw fruits or vegetables you have peeled or sliced yourself.
- Use water from a safe supply. When travelling, camping or hiking, boil water for at least one minute, or drink only canned or bottled carbonated beverages. This parasite is not killed by low doses of chlorine or iodine. Remember to also boil water that is to be used for brushing teeth. Ice cubes made from contaminated water may also carry the parasite.
- Always eat shellfish cooked.

If you are sick with diarrhea, see your doctor and avoid handling or preparing food for others.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Infectious Disease Control Team at 519-663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

References:

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