

What is cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis is a diarrheal illness caused by a protozoan (a single-celled parasite) belonging to any one of a number of *Cryptosporidium* species. Of the diseases that are spread through drinking or recreational water, cryptosporidiosis is one of the most common. The parasite is found in every region of the United States and throughout the world.

What are the symptoms of cryptosporidiosis?

The major symptom of cryptosporidiosis is diarrhea, which may be profuse and watery, often with stomach cramps and loss of appetite. Fever, fatigue, nausea, and vomiting are less common. Symptoms usually last about two weeks and may go in cycles in which a person may seem to get better for a few days, then feel worse, before the illness ends. Some people infected with *Cryptosporidium* have no symptoms of illness, but serve as a source of infection for others.

Are some people at risk for severe disease?

Although *Cryptosporidium* can infect all people, some groups are more likely to develop more serious illness. Young children and pregnant women may be susceptible to dehydration resulting from diarrhea. Persons with weakened immune systems are also at risk for serious illness. Examples of persons with weakened immune systems include those with HIV/AIDS, cancer, and transplant patients who are taking immunosuppressive drugs.

How is cryptosporidiosis spread?

Cryptosporidiosis lives in the intestinal tract of humans and animals and is passed in the feces. People can get *Cryptosporidium* by eating food, drinking water, or placing objects in their mouth that have been contaminated with feces from an infected person or animal. The most important animal source of *Cryptosporidium* in the United States is cattle. *Cryptosporidium* may spread among family members, sexual contacts, playmates, young children in child care settings, pets, and pet owners. *Cryptosporidium* may be found in soil, food, water, or on surfaces that have been contaminated with the feces from an infected human or animal. The organism can also be spread through recreational water such as swimming pools, hot tubs, fountains, lakes, rivers, springs or streams that have been contaminated with sewage or feces.

How soon after infection do symptoms occur?

The incubation period of cryptosporidiosis is not known precisely; one to 12 days is the likely range, with an average of about seven days.

How long can an infected person spread the parasite?

Cryptosporidium is excreted in the feces of a sick person at the onset of symptoms and can continue to be shed in the feces for several weeks after illness resolves. Outside the body, the parasite can remain infective for two to six months in a moist environment.

Should people sick with cryptosporidiosis stay home from work, school, or day care?

If a person is employed as a food handler, works in a day care center, or has direct contact with ill persons or the elderly, they must not work while they have diarrhea until 24 hours after diarrhea has stopped. Children with diarrhea should not attend a day care center until 24 hours after diarrhea has stopped.

What is the treatment for cryptosporidiosis?

Nitazoxanide has been approved for treatment of diarrhea caused by *Cryptosporidium* in people with healthy immune systems, however rehydration and avoidance of antidiarrheals is usually adequate.

What can be done to prevent a cryptosporidiosis infection?

1. Wash hands thoroughly with soap and water after using the toilet and before preparing or eating food.
2. Wash hands after changing a diaper, especially if a person works with diaper-aged children.
3. Protect others by not swimming in recreational water sources if experiencing diarrhea. Persons with cryptosporidiosis should wait two weeks after diarrhea stops to resume swimming.
4. Avoid swallowing recreational water and drinking untreated water from shallow wells, lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams.
5. Avoid using ice or drinking untreated water when traveling in countries where the water supply might be unsafe.
6. Avoid food that might be contaminated by washing/peeling all raw fruits and vegetables before eating, wash all food that will be eaten raw with water that is from a safe source, and avoid eating uncooked foods when traveling in countries where the water supply might be unsafe.
7. Avoid fecal exposure during sex.
8. Cryptosporidium is extremely hardy, and resists water chlorination. In a situation where safe drinking water is not available, boiling for 20 minutes is the surest way to purify water.

