

## What is a diarrheal illness?

Diarrhea is an illness that is defined by watery stools, less-formed stools and increased frequency of stools. Diarrhea can be caused by infectious diseases, changes in diet, such as eating more than usual amounts of certain foods, and the use of some medications. Infectious causes include viruses, bacteria and parasites. Some examples of infectious causes of diarrhea include:

- Viruses: norovirus, rotaviruses, enteric adenoviruses, astroviruses, caliciviruses
- Bacteria: *Shigella*, *Salmonella*, *Campylobacter*, *Escherichia coli* O157:H7, *Clostridium difficile*
- Parasites: *Giardia*, *Cryptosporidium*

## Who is at risk for a diarrheal illness?

People of all ages are susceptible to the viruses, bacteria and parasites that cause diarrhea. Depending on the infectious agent, complications are more likely to occur in children younger than 5, in the elderly or in people with compromised immune systems.

## What are the symptoms of a diarrheal illness?

The symptoms of diarrhea may include frequent loose or watery stools, abdominal cramps and tenderness, fever, generally not feeling well or blood in the stool. Individuals can be infected and can pass the germs to others with minimal signs or symptoms.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms may be variable depending on the cause of diarrhea. Disease-specific fact sheets can be accessed on the Oklahoma State Department of Health, Acute Disease Service website at <http://ads.health.ok.gov/>.

## How are diarrheal illnesses spread?

Bacteria, viruses or parasites are spread from the stools of infected people. People who have diarrhea and do not wash their hands after they use the bathroom, particularly while they have diarrhea, can contaminate objects (toys, surfaces, food, water, etc.) which others then touch or put into their mouths. Another way people may get diarrheal illness is from eating or drinking contaminated food or water. Infected food handlers that do not wash their hands well with soap and water after using the bathroom may contaminate food. Some bacteria, viruses or parasites 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.

## What can be done to prevent diarrheal illnesses in school settings?

- Children and employees with diarrhea should not attend school until at least 24 hours after the diarrhea has stopped.
- Use good hand hygiene habits such as washing with warm water and soap for 15-20 seconds. This is the only way to effectively remove substances from soiled hands. Alcohol-based hand gels reduce the amount of germs on hands but do not remove dirt.
- Good hand washing means:
  - Wet your hands with clean running water and apply soap.
  - Rub hands together to a lather and scrub all surfaces.
  - Continue rubbing hands for 20 seconds (imagine singing "Happy Birthday" twice).
  - Rinse hands with water.
  - Dry hands with paper towels or an air dryer. If possible, use a paper towel to turn off the faucet.
  - Avoid touching anything in the bathroom after you've cleaned your hands.

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**What can be done to prevent diarrheal illnesses in school settings?**

- The school nurse or administration should inform students and staff to report any diarrheal illness to the nursing office or designee at the first sign of symptoms.
- Students and staff should thoroughly wash hands after using the restrooms and before handling food for themselves or others.
- Elementary grade students may need verbal reminders or staff supervision when washing hands.
- Schools should ensure that there are adequate supplies of liquid soap and paper towels for hand washing.
- Schools may consider use of alcohol-based hand hygiene products to be used when hands are visibly clean in areas such as the cafeteria and classroom.

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Acute Disease Service

Oklahoma State  
Department of Health

For further information call or visit us on the World Wide Web  
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