

What is shigellosis?

Shigellosis is the term for an intestinal (diarrhea-causing) illness caused by *Shigella* bacteria. Two-thirds of cases that are reported to the Oklahoma State Department of Health occur among children under the age of ten, especially those who attend day care centers. However, anyone can be infected with the bacteria.

What are the symptoms of shigellosis?

Symptoms include mild to severe diarrhea, fever, vomiting, and abdominal cramps. The stools may contain blood or mucous. The average time between exposure and symptoms is one to three days and illness can last from four to seven days.

How does someone get shigellosis?

Shigella is spread in the stools of people infected with the bacteria. People who have shigellosis and do not wash their hands after they use the bathroom, particularly while they have diarrhea, can contaminate objects (toys, food, water, etc.) which others then put into their mouths. The family members and playmates of young children are at greatest risk of getting shigellosis.

Shigellosis can move quickly through groups of diapered children for two reasons:

1. *Shigella* is VERY infectious. It can take as few as ten bacteria to cause illness.
2. It can be passed in stools for as long as four weeks after the beginning of symptoms. Even if a person does not feel sick anymore, they can still pass *Shigella* to others if handwashing habits are poor.

Shigellosis may be acquired 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. Water may become contaminated from sewage or if someone with shigellosis swims in it.

Should someone go to work, school, or send his or her child to day care with *Shigella*?

Because *Shigella* infections are easily passed from person to person, anyone that handles food, provides day care for children or the elderly, or provides direct patient care should never work if they have diarrhea. A health care provider should be seen immediately to determine the cause of illness. If a person with one of these occupations has shigellosis, he/she must not return to work until two negative stool cultures test negative for *Shigella*. Children may not attend day care with diarrhea, but may return 24 hours after diarrhea stops.

Is there any treatment for shigellosis?

Most people with shigellosis will recover on their own. Some may require fluids to prevent dehydration. Antibiotics are occasionally used to treat severe cases or to shorten the carrier phase, which may be important for food handlers, children in daycare, or institutionalized individuals. Anyone with severe or long-lasting diarrhea, especially small children and elderly people, should see a health care provider. **It is not recommended to take medicines that prevent diarrhea.** These drugs can actually increase the duration of illness because the bacteria are prevented from leaving the intestinal tract.

What can be done to prevent shigellosis?

The most important way to prevent the spread of *Shigella* is thorough hand washing with warm water and soap. People should be especially careful to wash their hands after diapering a child, going to the bathroom, and before eating, or preparing food. Day care providers should supervise hand washing of all children that are wearing diapers or are not completely toilet-trained. Do not allow children to attend day care with diarrhea.

OSDH 10/05

