



# Giardiasis (Beaver Fever)

## What is giardiasis?

Giardiasis, often called “Beaver Fever”, is a diarrheal illness caused by the parasite *Giardia*. It is a common cause of diarrhea in the United States, where about 20,000 cases are reported each year. *Giardia* is so common, it can be found within every region on the United States and around the world. Giardiasis is no longer a [reportable](#) disease in Oklahoma.

## Where is *Giardia* found?

*Giardia* is found in infected people (with or without symptoms) and wild and domestic animals. *Giardia* is also found on surfaces or in lakes, ponds, rivers, and streams that are contaminated with feces (stool) from infected humans or animals.

## How is giardiasis spread?

People and animals infected with *Giardia* pass it in their stool, and it may contaminate water, food, or surfaces such as door handles or toys. People may become infected directly by hand-to-mouth transfer of the infected stool. That is, hands of an infected person can become soiled while they are using the toilet, and if they are not thoroughly washed, *Giardia* can be transferred to food, drink, or items handled or eaten by another person. People can also become infected indirectly by swallowing water that has been contaminated with infected stool (ex: swimming in lakes or drinking untreated water from streams). Person-to-person transmission may occur in daycare centers or group settings where people do not have access to hand washing facilities or where hand hygiene is poor.

## Who gets giardiasis?

While giardiasis is often thought of as a camping or backpacking-related illness, anyone can get giardiasis.

People more likely to become infected include:

- Children in child care settings, especially children in diapers
- Close contacts (ex: caretakers, household members, sexual partners, and playmates) of people ill with giardiasis
- People who drink water or use ice made from untreated or improperly treated water sources (ex: lakes, streams, rivers)
- People who have private water systems (wells or springs) that are not correctly installed or maintained
- Backpackers, hikers, and campers who drink unsafe water or who do not practice good hand hygiene
- People who swallow water while swimming or playing in *Giardia* contaminated recreational water, especially in lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, and streams
- Men who have sex with men
- International travelers

## What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

*Giardia* can cause a variety of symptoms including: mild to severe diarrhea, stomach cramps, gas, bloating, upset stomach, pale and greasy stools, and fatigue. Sometimes diarrhea may last several weeks or months and can cause weight loss. People rarely experience a fever with giardiasis. Some people with *Giardia* infection will have no symptoms at all. Many young children have no symptoms and are the source of infection for other children, especially in day care settings.

## How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually begin within 7–10 days, but can appear from 3–25 days after infection with *Giardia*.

**How long can an infected person spread *Giardia*?**

An infected person can spread *Giardia* for a few weeks to a few months. Treatment may shorten this length of time. People with diarrhea from giardiasis should not use water recreation facilities such as swimming pools, spray parks, interactive water parks, splash pads, or water slides until two weeks after symptoms stop.

**What is the treatment for *Giardia*?**

There are several antibiotics that a doctor may prescribe to treat giardiasis. It is also important to prevent dehydration by drinking plenty of fluids. This is especially the case for infants and pregnant women who may be more likely to become dehydrated from the diarrhea caused by giardiasis.

**Does everyone infected with *Giardia* need to be treated?**

People who are infected with *Giardia* but do not have symptoms do not usually need to be treated. People who have symptoms of giardiasis and have had positive laboratory work for the disease should discuss the need for treatment and treatment options with their health care provider.

**Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?**

Since *Giardia* is found in feces (stool), people with diarrhea should not go to school or work until their stools have returned to normal. It is especially important that children in day care centers not return to daycare and people who handle food not return to food-handling duties at work until their diarrhea stops. Anyone with giardiasis or diarrhea should wash their hands carefully after each toilet visit.

**What can be done to stop the spread of giardiasis?**

1. Thoroughly wash hands after using the toilet or changing/handling diapers.
2. Do not prepare food for people outside your household while infected with *Giardia*.
3. Always wash hands before preparing food and before eating.
4. Avoid eating food that may be contaminated.
5. When a household member has giardiasis, carefully clean and disinfect areas that could be contaminated, including toilet areas, changing table, soiled clothing, door handles, toys, etc.
6. Properly dispose of sewage so water sources will not be contaminated.
7. Avoid water used for drinking or recreational activities that may be contaminated.
8. While enjoying outdoor activities, treat your drinking water by boiling. If boiling is not possible, two to four drops of household bleach may be added to each liter of water. If allowed to stand for 20 minutes, water treated in this way is an acceptable emergency alternative to boiling.