Giardiasis

What is Giardiasis?

Giardiasis is a diarrheal disease caused by the microscopic parasite *Giardia*. A parasite is an organism that feeds off of another organism to survive. Once a person or animal (i.e. cats, dogs, cattle, deer, and beavers) has been infected with *Giardia*, the parasite lives in the intestines and is passed in feces (poop). Once outside the body, *Giardia* can sometimes survive for weeks or months.

How common is giardiasis?

Giardiasis is the most frequently diagnosed intestinal parasitic disease in the United States. *Giardia* can be found within every region of the U.S. and around the world. There are about **20,000 cases** of giardiasis each year in the U.S. In 2011, San Bernardino County had an incidence rate of **1.9 giardiasis cases per 100,000 people**.

Who is most at risk for getting giardiasis?

Though giardiasis is commonly thought of as a camping or backpacking-related disease and is sometimes called "Beaver Fever," anyone can get giardiasis. People more likely to become infected include:

- Children in child care settings, especially diaper-aged children
- Close contacts (i.e. people living in the same household) or people who care for those sick with giardiasis
- People who drink water or use ice made from places where *Giardia* may live (i.e. untreated or improperly treated water from lakes, streams, or wells)
- Backpackers, hikers, and campers who drink unsafe water or who do not practice good hygiene (such as proper hand washing)
- People who swallow water while swimming and playing in recreational water where *Giardia* may live, especially in lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, and streams
- International travelers
- People exposed to human feces (poop) through sexual contact

How do people get infected with this parasite?

Giardiasis can be spread by:

- Swallowing *Giardia* picked up from surfaces (i.e. bathroom handles, changing tables, diaper pails, or toys) that contain stool from an infected person or animal
- Drinking water or using ice made from water sources where *Giardia* may live (i.e. untreated or improperly treated water from lakes, streams, or wells)
- Swallowing water while swimming or playing in water where *Giardia* may live, especially in lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, and streams
- Eating uncooked food that contains *Giardia* organisms
- Having contact with someone who is ill with giardiasis
- Traveling to countries where giardiasis is common

Anything that comes into contact with feces (poop) from infected humans or animals can become contaminated with the *Giardia* parasite. People become infected when they swallow the parasite. It is not possible to become infected through contact with blood.

What can be done to prevent giardiasis?

To prevent and control infection with the *Giardia* parasite, it is important to:

- Avoid water (drinking or recreational) that may be contaminated.
- Avoid eating food that may be contaminated.
- Practice good hygiene.
- Prevent contact and contamination with feces (poop) during sex.

What are the symptoms of giardiasis?

Infection with *Giardia* can cause a variety of intestinal symptoms, which include:

- Diarrhea
- Gas or flatulence
- Greasy stool that can float
- Stomach or abdominal cramps
- Upset stomach or nausea
- Dehydration

Symptoms may vary and can last from 1 to 2 weeks or longer. If you think you may have giardiasis, contact your healthcare provider.

How is giardiasis diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will ask you to submit stool (poop) samples to see if you are infected. Because testing for giardiasis can be difficult, you may be asked to submit several stool specimens collected over several days.

What is the treatment for giardiasis?

Many prescription drugs are available to treat giardiasis. Although the *Giardia* parasite can infect all people, infants and pregnant women may be more likely to experience dehydration from the diarrhea caused by giardiasis. To prevent dehydration, infants and pregnant women should drink a lot of fluids while sick. Dehydration can be life threatening for infants, so it is especially important that parents talk to their healthcare providers about treatment options for their infants.

For more information, please contact:
County of San Bernardino
Department of Public Health
Communicable Disease Section
www.sbcounty.gov/pubhlth

(800) 722-4794

To report a possible foodborne illness, contact:
County of San Bernardino
Department of Public Health
Division of Environmental Health Services
(800) 442-2283

Source: this information was taken from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's website www.cdc.gov.