

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Shigellosis

What you need to know

What is shigellosis?

Shigellosis is an infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria called *Shigella*.

What sort of germ is *Shigella*?

The *Shigella* germ is actually a family of bacteria that can cause diarrhea in humans. They are microscopic living creatures that pass from person to person.

What are the symptoms of Shigellosis?

Most people infected with *Shigella* develop diarrhea, fever, stomach cramps, nausea, or vomiting starting a day or two after they are exposed to the bacterium. The diarrhea is often bloody. Shigellosis usually resolves in 5 to 7 days. In some persons, especially young children and the elderly, the diarrhea can be so severe that the patient needs to be hospitalized. Some persons who are infected may have no symptoms at all, but may still pass the *Shigella* bacteria to others.

How long after exposure do symptoms begin?

It takes from 1 to 7 days, usually 2 to 4 days, from the time a person is exposed until symptoms start.

How can *Shigella* infections be diagnosed?

Children or any members of your household who develop any of these symptoms should be tested for shigellosis by having a stool specimen examination. Laboratory tests will then identify *Shigella* in the stools or rectal swabs containing stool of an infected person. Please see your private physician for this testing.

How can *Shigella* infections be treated?

Shigellosis can be treated with antibiotics. Appropriate treatment kills the *Shigella* bacteria that might be present in the patient's stools, and shortens the illness. **Do not stop taking the medicine even if you feel better.** Antidiarrheal agents are likely to make the illness worse and should be avoided.

How long is *Shigella* contagious?

A person is contagious from the beginning of symptoms until the bacteria are no longer present in the intestine, usually 7 - 14 days. It may last longer in infants. Do not allow your child contact with other children outside the family until your child is better.

How do people catch *Shigella*?

The *Shigella* bacteria pass from one infected person to the next. *Shigella* are present in the diarrheal stools of infected persons while they are sick and for a week or two afterwards. Most *Shigella*

infections are the result of the bacterium passing from stools or soiled fingers of one person to the mouth of another person. This happens when basic hygiene and hand washing habits are inadequate. It is particularly likely to occur among toddlers who are not fully toilet-trained. Family members and playmates of such children are at high risk of becoming infected.

Shigella infections may be acquired from eating contaminated food. Food may become contaminated by infected food handlers who forget to wash their hands with soap after using the bathroom.

What can a person do to prevent this illness?

- If your child has *Shigella* your doctor may tell you to keep your child away from other children until the infection clears.
- Do not swim if you are experiencing diarrhea and for 1 week after diarrhea stops. This is especially important for children.
- Infected food service, patient care, or day care workers should be off work until they are no longer infected.
- Wash your hands after using the bathroom.
- Wash your hands before and after preparing food.
- Wash your hands before eating.
- Wash your hands and the child's hands after changing diapers.
- Wash soiled diapers (cloth), sheets or clothing in hot soapy water and dry in clothes dryer.
- Seal disposable diapers in a plastic bag and put in a tightly closed garbage can. This helps keep animals from scattering the soiled items and possibly spreading bacteria to others.
- Keep your bathroom and diaper changing area clean. Use a freshly prepared 1:100 dilution of common household bleach, approximately 2 teaspoons of bleach for every quart (4 cups) of water. Surfaces must be pre-cleaned with detergent and water before using a bleach solution. Use bleach solution and let air dry.
- Cook meat well before eating it. Put cooked meat into the refrigerator right after a meal. Don't leave it on the counter to cool off.
- Wash and/or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating.
- Do not drink untreated water from shallow wells, lakes, ponds, rivers and streams.

Are there complications?

Rarely *Shigella* leads to serious problems. In some cases, the diarrhea can lead to excessive loss of body fluids (dehydration). It is important for people with *Shigella* (especially babies and small children) to drink plenty of fluids. Few cases of *Shigella* may cause serious bowel (intestine) changes, needing treatment by a doctor. About 2% of persons who are infected with one type of *Shigella*, *Shigella flexneri*, later develop pains in their joints, irritation of the eyes, and painful urination. This is called post-infectious arthritis. It can last for months or years, and can lead to chronic arthritis. Post-infectious arthritis is caused by a reaction to *Shigella* infection that happens only in people who are genetically predisposed to it.

Once someone has had shigellosis, they are not likely to get infected with that specific type again for at least several years. However, they can still get infected with other types of *Shigella*.

For more information, call (816) 325-7204

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