

Amebiasis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis (am-e-bye-a-sis), also called amebic dysentery, is a diarrheal illness caused by a parasite, *Entamoeba histolytica*. This parasite lives in the intestines and produces eggs (cysts) which are passed from the body in the stool.

Who gets amebiasis?

Anyone can get amebiasis, but it occurs in people who live in or have visited areas of the world with poor sanitary conditions. Stool from infected people may contaminate water or food. Amebiasis is also found in people living in institutions that have poor sanitary conditions. Men who have sex with men can become infected with the parasite and may or may not have symptoms. Animals are not infected with the parasite.

How do people get amebiasis?

A person becomes infected with *E. histolytica* by swallowing cysts of the parasite. This can occur by eating food which has been prepared by an infected person who has poor personal hygiene, drinking contaminated water, eating food washed in contaminated water, or by oral-anal sexual contact with a person infected with *E. histolytica*.

What are the symptoms of amebiasis?

A person infected with the *E. histolytica* parasite may have mild (most common) or severe symptoms or no symptoms at all. Usually, about 1 in 10 people who are infected with the parasite becomes sick from the infection. Mild symptoms may include:

- Abdominal pain or cramping
- Diarrhea alternating with periods of remission or constipation

Other symptoms may also occur, such as:

- Bloody diarrhea
- Fever

Rarely the parasite may invade other organs of the body, such as the liver, lung or brain, and cause abscesses (pockets of infection). Symptoms may appear from a few days to a few months after exposure but usually appear within 2 to 4 weeks.

How is amebiasis diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects amebiasis, samples of the patient's stool and blood will be examined.

What is the treatment for amebiasis?

Your health care provider can prescribe antibiotics to treat amebiasis. There is no over-the-counter medication that will cure this infection. (NOTE: It is very important to finish your antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

Should a person infected with amebiasis be excluded from work or school?

Under ordinary circumstances, it should not be necessary for an infected person to stay home from work or school. The type of personal contact in work and school environments does not normally spread amebiasis. Special precautions for food handlers and young children attending day care include:

- Food handlers who are infected should not work directly with food until 24 hours after diarrhea has resolved.
- Young children who attend day care should stay home while they have diarrhea.
- Consult your local health department for further advice.

Can people with amebiasis pass the illness to others?

An infected person is able to spread the disease to others as long as *E. histolytica* cysts are being passed in the stool.

How can amebiasis be prevented?

- Practice good handwashing habits (rubbing hands together under warm soapy water for at least 15 seconds or using alcohol-based sanitizer) after going to the bathroom, before preparing meals, before eating and after changing diapers.
- Drink water only from sources known to be free of sewage contamination.
- Do not swallow water while swimming in pools, lakes, ponds, water parks, etc.
- Avoid sexual practices that may involve direct contact with feces.
- When traveling to a country that has poor sanitary conditions, drink only bottled water or boiled (for one minute) water or carbonated drinks in cans or bottles, eat only fresh fruit or vegetables that you peeled yourself, and eat only pasteurized dairy products.

Where can I get more information on amebiasis?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health <http://www.nj.gov/health>
- Centers for Disease Control & Prevention <http://www.cdc.gov>

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional.

Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention