

GIARDIASIS

Giardia lamblia (pronounced “gee-ar-dee-uh”) is a parasite/protozoan that causes gastrointestinal symptoms. When the organism is ingested (usually via a contaminated water source), it quickly “sets up shop” in the small intestine. Common symptoms include diarrhea, nausea, gas, bloating and abdominal cramps. Often there is microscopic blood in the stool, but obvious bleeding is rare. Symptoms can be intermittent and sometimes are not very severe, so the diagnosis can often be delayed several weeks or even months.



Do you have to travel to a third world country to get a giardia infection? That’s certainly a great way to get it, since there is often contamination of water supplies with animal and human waste. But people get giardiasis in the United States, too, often from drinking untreated stream water, spring water or even well water. Your healthcare provider will usually take a careful travel and water source history when you have a possible water-borne intestinal illness, since this helps to narrow down the list of possible causes of your illness.

The diagnosis of giardiasis can be challenging, since the protozoan sucks onto the brush border of the small intestine and doesn’t let go easily. As a result, it is often difficult to see full parasites or their eggs in stool samples, which are looked at under the microscope in the laboratory. There are also stool tests that measure for proteins made by the protozoan (giardia antigen test). Both types of tests are available at EUSHS. Sometimes, we treat based upon symptoms alone, since in some cases the only way to make the correct diagnosis is for the intestinal specialist (gastroenterologist) to take biopsies via an endoscope.

Treatment of giardiasis in adults is pretty straightforward, but sometimes is not 100% successful the first time around. Adults are commonly given a medication called Metronidazole (Flagyl) to take for 5 to 10 days. Please read the package insert carefully, for patients on Flagyl get a metallic taste in the mouth and need to avoid alcohol. There are also pregnancy restrictions.

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For more information about giardiasis, you should check out the American Academy of Family Physicians patient information web site (familydoctor.org), at <http://familydoctor.org/x1697.xml>.

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