

Shigella (shigellosis)

Fact sheet

Shigellosis is a disease caused by the Shigella bacteria. It causes diarrhoea and is easily spread between people.

What is Shigella?

Shigella infection, also called shigellosis, is caused by the Shigella bacteria. Shigella bacteria can be spread through contact with the faeces (poo) of an infected person, or through drinking and eating contaminated water or food. It usually causes diarrhoea.

What are the symptoms of Shigella?

Symptoms of Shigella infection include:

- diarrhoea
- fever
- nausea
- blood or mucous in the faeces
- vomiting, and stomach cramps can also occur.

The symptoms usually begin 1-3 days after you become infected. Symptoms usually last 4-7 days, but can last longer.

For some people, symptoms may not begin for up to 1 week or they may not develop symptoms at all.

How is Shigella spread?

Shigella is found in faeces (poo). You can get a Shigella infection by:

- eating food or water contaminated with the bacteria
- touching contaminated objects such as taps, nappies and toys and then touching your mouth
- having oral or anal sex with an infected person

Who is at risk of getting Shigella?

People most at risk of Shigella infection include:

- people who travel to countries where shigella is common
- men who have sex with men
- children
- people with poor immune systems
- elderly.

How is Shigella prevented?

To avoid getting Shigella infection, you should:

- wash your hands thoroughly with soap and water for at least 20 seconds:
- after going to the toilet
- after changing nappies
- after any possible exposures to faecal material
- before handling food or caring for other people
- wash vegetables and fruit that are eaten raw

People travelling to countries where Shigella is common should also:

- avoid uncooked foods, including fruit and vegetables unless you are able to peel them yourself
- drink only bottled or boiled water
- not drink untreated water, including ice and drinks mixed with water
- avoid eating from street stalls
- ensure hot food is thoroughly cooked and eaten whilst hot.

People who have Shigella infection should:

- not prepare food or care for others while they are sick
- not go to work while they have symptoms. People who work as food handlers (such as kitchen staff and waiters, butchers); and those who care for patients, children or the elderly should not return to work until 48 hours after their diarrhoea has stopped. Children, particularly those in nappies, should be kept home from childcare until 24 hours after their diarrhoea has stopped.
- not have sex where there is any contact with the anus, to avoid transmitting Shigella to the mouth
- not swim until 2 weeks after their diarrhoea stopped

How is Shigella diagnosed?

A doctor will test a faeces (poo) sample.

How is Shigella treated?

People with Shigella infection are usually prescribed antibiotics by their doctor to reduce the severity and length of illness. Antibiotics may also shorten the time for which the person is infectious to others.

Drinking a lot of fluid is important to avoid dehydration. Young children (particularly infants) are at risk of dehydration from diarrhoea and parents should seek medical attention.

What is the public health response?

Laboratories are required to notify cases of Shigella to the local Public Health Unit. Public health unit staff will interview cases and their carers and try to identify the source of infection and control further cases.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055.