

What is *Cryptosporidium*?

Cryptosporidium is a protozoan parasite (a tiny organism). It causes an infection called cryptosporidiosis that can affect both people and cattle. The most common symptom is watery diarrhoea. *Cryptosporidium* is found in lakes, streams, rivers, untreated water and sometimes in swimming pools.

Who gets *Cryptosporidium* infections?

Anyone can get a *Cryptosporidium* infection, but certain groups are more likely to get the infection:

- young children between 1 and 5 years old;
- people who care for, or work with, children.

How do you get infected with *Cryptosporidium*?

You can become infected through contact with someone else who has the illness or contact with their contaminated items (for example when changing a nappy).

It is also possible to get infected through contact with farm animals or household pets; or by swimming in, or drinking, contaminated water.

Occasionally you can become infected by eating and drinking contaminated food or drink.

How can you avoid getting infected with *Cryptosporidium*?

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water:

- before preparing and eating food;
- after handling raw food;
- after going to the toilet or changing a baby's nappy;

- after contact with pets and other animals;
- after working in the garden.

Always wash and/or peel fruits and vegetables before eating them.

Do not drink untreated water from lakes, rivers or streams. Avoid swallowing water when swimming in lakes and swimming pools.

When travelling to countries where standards of water hygiene are poor always drink bottled water. Never add ice to your drinks and don't brush your teeth with tap water.

You should pay special attention to hygiene during farm visits, wash your hands after any contact with animals, and eat only in designated areas.

How can you prevent others in your household becoming infected with *Cryptosporidium*?

Everyone in the house should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after going to the toilet, after handling soiled clothing or bedding and before preparing/eating food.

Wash the infected person's laundry separately and on the hottest cycle of the washing machine for that particular fabric.

Clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins after use with detergent and hot water, followed by a household disinfectant.

Everyone in the house should have their own towel and they should not use anyone else's.

The infected person should not prepare or serve food for others.

What are the symptoms of *Cryptosporidium* infection and how long do they last?

The most common symptom is watery diarrhoea. This may last between 2 days and 4 weeks and can come and go over this period. Most cases resolve within four weeks.

Other possible symptoms include stomach pains, vomiting, fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, headache and muscle pain.

The infection can be more serious in people who have immune systems that are not working properly (including people who have cancer, are having chemotherapy, or have HIV/AIDS).

How are *Cryptosporidium* infections treated?

There is no specific treatment for *Cryptosporidium* infections. Most people will recover fully without any treatment.

During this time it is important to drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration and you can lose important sugars and minerals from your body.

If you feel sick and have difficulty keeping fluids down try taking small sips of fluid frequently. Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks or alcohol. Always dilute sugary drinks even if you would not normally dilute them.

Do you need to see your GP?

If you need advice on the treatment of your infection you should discuss this with your GP.

Always contact your GP if any of the following apply:

- your symptoms are severe or do not improve after a few days;
- you have a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over;
- you have symptoms of severe dehydration, such as sunken eyes and passing small quantities of dark, strong smelling urine;
- you have a baby with symptoms;
- you have an immune system that is not working properly (including people who have cancer, are having chemotherapy, or have HIV/AIDS).

Do you need to stay off work or school?

Yes. While you are ill and have symptoms you are infectious to other people. You can return to work or school once you have been free from diarrhoea for 48 hours.

You should tell your employer you have had a *Cryptosporidium* infection if you work with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the young, those in poor health, or if you handle food.

Children should not attend school/childcare or play with other children until they are fully recovered and symptom free for 48 hours.

Do not go swimming if you have diarrhoea. If you have had a *Cryptosporidium* infection do not go swimming until you have been free from diarrhoea for at least two weeks.



Public Health Agency, 12-22 Linenhall Street,
Belfast BT2 8BS. Tel: 028 90 321 313
www.publichealth.hscni.net