



Disease Fact Sheet Shigellosis

What is shigellosis? Shigellosis is an infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria called *Shigella*. Most people who are infected with *Shigella* develop diarrhea, fever and stomach cramps starting a day or two after they are exposed to the germ. 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 can *Shigella* infections be diagnosed? Many different kinds of diseases can cause diarrhea and bloody diarrhea and the treatment depends on which germ is causing the diarrhea. Determining that *Shigella* is the cause of the illness depends upon laboratory tests that identify *Shigella* in the stools of an infected person.

How can *Shigella* infections be treated? Persons with mild infections will usually recover quickly without antibiotic treatment. Therefore, when many persons in a community are affected by shigellosis, antibiotics are sometimes used selectively to treat only the more severe cases.

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 bacteria 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 also be acquired from eating contaminated food. Contaminated food may look and smell normal. Food may become contaminated by infected food handlers who forget to wash their hands with soap after using the bathroom. Vegetables can become contaminated if they are harvested from a field with sewage in it. Flies can breed in infected feces and then contaminate food. *Shigella* infections can also be acquired by drinking or swimming in contaminated water. Water may become contaminated if sewage runs into it or if someone with shigellosis swims in it.

What can a person do to prevent this illness? Frequent and careful hand washing is important among all age groups. Frequent, supervised hand washing of all children should be followed in child care centers and in homes with children who are not completely toilet-trained (including children in diapers).

How common is shigellosis? Every year, about 18,000 laboratory confirmed cases of shigellosis are reported in the United States. Because many milder cases are not diagnosed or reported, the actual number of infections may be 20 times greater. Shigellosis is particularly common and causes recurrent problems in settings where hygiene is poor and can sometimes sweep through entire communities. Shigellosis is more common in summer than winter. Children, especially toddlers 2-4 years of age are the most likely to get shigellosis. Many cases are related to the spread of illness in child care settings, and many more are the result of the spread of the illness in families with small children.