



Health and Wellness

AMEBIASIS (am-e-bi-a-sis)

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a parasite called *Entamoeba histolytica* (ent-a-ME-ba his-to-LI-ti-ka). Although anyone can acquire this illness, it is most common in people who have traveled to developing countries and in people who live in institutions with poor sanitation.

How does a person get amebiasis?

The parasite lives only in humans therefore the parasite is excreted in the feces (stool) of an infected person. The parasite has an outer shell to protect it and it can live outside the body and in the environment for long periods of time. Infections can happen after eating food or drinking water that has been contaminated by feces that contain the amoeba cysts. Water can be contaminated with human wastes where sewage disposal practices are poor. Another source of the parasite could be raw vegetables which can be contaminated if they are fertilized with human waste. Although, this is not permitted in Canada, it is a practice still followed in other parts of the world. Travelers who visit countries with poor sanitary conditions and men who have sex with men are at a higher risk of acquiring this infection.

What are the symptoms?

People exposed to this parasite may experience mild or severe symptoms or no symptoms at all. The mild form of amebiasis includes nausea, diarrhea, weight loss, abdominal tenderness and, occasionally, fever. The symptoms may appear from a few days to a few months after exposure but usually within two to four weeks. Rare complications may include the spread of the infection to the liver, lungs or brain.

How can you prevent amebiasis infection?

- Thorough hand washing is the best prevention. Make sure hands are properly washed after using the washroom, handling diapers and before and after preparing or serving food.
- Clean and sanitize diaper changing areas after each use.
- Drink water from a safe supply. When traveling, boil water for at least 1 minute if you are unsure if it is safe to drink or use bottled water. Remember that ice cubes made from contaminated water may also carry the parasite.
- Avoid eating raw shell fish harvested from unknown sources.
- When traveling, peel all fruits and vegetables before eating.
- If ill with diarrhea, avoid preparing or handling food.
- Avoid swallowing recreational water (pools, hot tubs, lakes or rivers).

For more information please contact 1-800-958-6400 or the local Public Health Nursing Office.