

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasitic amoeba called *Entamoeba histolytica*. Wisconsin averages about 10-15 cases per year.

Who gets amebiasis?

Anyone can get amebiasis, but it occurs more often in travelers or immigrants arriving from tropical or subtropical areas. It is common in people who live in developing countries that have poor sanitary conditions. It is also found in people who live in institutions that have poor sanitary conditions. Men who have sex with men can become infected and gets sick from the infection, but they often do not have symptoms.

How is amebiasis spread?

Amebiasis is contracted by swallowing the cyst stage of the parasite in contaminated food or water. It can also be spread by direct or indirect contact with fecal material from an infected person.

What are the symptoms of amebiasis?

People exposed to this parasite may experience mild or severe symptoms or no symptoms at all. On average, about one in 10 people who are infected with *E. histolytica* becomes sick from the infection. The symptoms are quite mild and can include loose stools, weight loss, abdominal tenderness and cramping, and fever. In rare cases *E. histolytica* invades the liver and forms a liver abscess. Even less commonly, it spreads to other parts of the body such as the lungs or brain.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear from a few days to a few months after exposure, but usually symptoms appear within 2 to 4 weeks.

For how long can an infected person carry this parasite?

Some people with amebiasis may be carriers of the parasite for weeks to years, often without symptoms.

Where are the parasites that cause amebiasis found?

Infected people are the only source of the parasite. Fecal material from infected people may contaminate water or food and may serve as a vehicle to infect others. Animals are not infected with or carry the parasite. In some parts of the world, flies may serve to transfer cysts from human feces to fruits and vegetables.

How is amebiasis diagnosed?

Examination of stools under a microscope is the most common way for a doctor to diagnose amebiasis. Sometimes, several stool samples collected on different days must be obtained because the number of parasites (amoeba) shed in feces may vary from day to day.

Diagnosis of amebiasis can be very difficult. One problem is that other parasites an cell can look very similar to *E. histolytica* when seen under a microscope. Also, *E. histolytica* and another ameba, *Entamoeba dispar*, which is about 10 times common, look the same when seen under a microscope. Unlike infection with *E. histolytica*, infection with *E. dispar* never makes people sick and therefore doe not need to be treated.

What is the treatment for amebiasis?

Several antibiotics are available to treat amebiasis. A doctor must prescribe treatment.

Should a person with amebiasis be excluded from work or school?

Generally, it is not necessary to exclude an infected person from work or school. Casual contact at work or school is unlikely to transmit the disease. Food workers, children enrolled in daycare settings or individuals in institutions for the developmentally disabled may need special precautions. Consult your local health department for advice in such instances.

What precautions should the infected person follow?

The most important precaution is careful hand washing before eating or preparing food, after changing diapers and after each toilet visit. Proper disposal of sewage is also important. Homosexual males should refrain from intimate contact until effectively treated.

When traveling to a country that has poor sanitary conditions, what should I eat or drink so that I will NOT develop amebiasis or other diseases?

- Drink only bottled or boiled (for 1 minute) water or carbonated drinks in cans or bottles and make sure the tops of the bottles or cans are clean.
- Do **not** drink fountain drinks or drinks with ice cubes.
- Do **not** eat fresh fruit or vegetables that you did not peel yourself.
- Do **not** eat or drink milk, cheese, or dairy products that have not been pasteurized.
- Do **not** eat or drink anything sold by street vendors.