

# Cryptosporidium

Cryptosporidium is a parasite which lives in the intestines of people, birds and animals. It produces cysts (eggs) that can survive in the environment for a long time. The cysts are very tiny, only about 1/500<sup>th</sup> of millimetre in size, so you won't see them. When a person, bird or animal is infected they pass out the cysts in their faeces.

## What are the symptoms?

The symptoms are smelly, watery diarrhoea and stomach cramps. Lack of appetite, weight loss, fever, nausea and vomiting sometimes occur. Some people who are infected with Cryptosporidium do not have any symptoms but they are still passing out the cysts in their bowel motions. A faecal specimen arranged by a GP will confirm if a person has Cryptosporidium.

## Illness development period

A person is infectious as long as the cysts are still in their system. This varies from person to person but is usually for several weeks from when the diarrhoea started. It takes usually 7 days (sometimes from 1 to 12) for symptoms to show after infection.

## How is it spread?

Cryptosporidium is most often spread by hands contaminated with faeces during toilet use or nappy changing. From hands it can spread to surfaces, toys, food and water. It can also spread in shared water such as swimming pools. When the cysts are swallowed the person then becomes infected.

## What is the treatment?

There is no specific treatment, but the doctor may prescribe some medication to relieve the symptoms. People with Cryptosporidium usually get better without treatment. Ensure children have lots of fluids as they are more likely to get dehydrated than adults.

## Can children attend their Early Childhood Education service?

Children can return when they have been free from symptoms for at least 48 hours. Careful attention must be paid to hygiene during toileting and nappy changing as the cysts can still pass through the faeces for several weeks. Hand washing is essential.

## Suggested precautions

These steps are to minimise the risk of spread to other children, staff and the wider community:

- Advise parents immediately that there is a child with confirmed Cryptosporidium.
- Reinforce the 48 hour symptom free exclusion period.
- Encourage good hand washing procedures among all children and teachers, after toilet use, nappy change and before eating or handling food. Please note: uncooked foods such as fruit, crackers etc can easily become contaminated by unwashed hands.
- Children with Cryptosporidium should be carefully monitored during hand washing.
- Always wash hands thoroughly after playing with animal's especially dairy cattle and calves.
- Make sure that children wash their hands after nappy change, especially infants who will require assistance.
- Cryptosporidium is very hard to kill with disinfectant, even bleach. It's better to clean all surfaces and toys with hot soapy water.
- Increase the frequency of toy cleaning. Rotate or put out fewer toys so that more frequent cleaning is manageable. Toys that are sucked or chewed should go through the dishwasher or washing machine daily.
- Remove play dough until the illness has subsided.
- Parents should encourage good hand washing at home with liquid soap, and if they have someone in the house with Cryptosporidium, also avoid sharing towels.
- Children should not go swimming in a pool until two weeks after the symptoms have gone.
- NB If gloves are used for nappy changing extra care should be taken. **Gloves are optional and not usually a hygiene advantage.** The most common problem with the use of gloves is the sense of false security they can create. A person wearing gloves will be less aware of soiled hands than a person with bare hands, and is at greater risk of contaminating the environment around them than a person with bare hands.

Public Health Advisors for Early Childhood Education Services provide support and advice on a range of illnesses including practical hygiene guidelines for special situations, letters for parents, and guidance and support for Supervisor decisions. We can be contacted at Regional Public Health on 04 570 9002.

