

# Shigellosis

## Description

Shigellosis (or bacillary dysentery) is a communicable disease caused by *Shigella* bacteria that live in the intestines of people. When a person is infected they pass out the bacteria in their faeces (poo).

Humans are the only significant carrier for *Shigella*.

## How common is shigellosis?

It occurs world-wide but is relatively uncommon in New Zealand. Most people who get it have either travelled overseas recently, particularly in India, Nepal, South East Asia, and the Pacific Islands, or have had contact with someone who has recently travelled overseas.

*Shigella* is frequently found in water contaminated by human sewage.

## How do you know if you have it?

It usually takes from 1 to 3 days but may range from 12 hours to 1 week for symptoms to show up after you have been infected.

The symptoms are loose faeces (poo) of small volume accompanied by fever, nausea, and sometimes blood poisoning, vomiting, and abdominal cramps.

Typically the faeces contain blood and mucus resulting from the invading bacteria causing small ulcers and abscesses in the wall of the intestines. Many people have watery diarrhoea.

## How serious is it?

The symptoms are very unpleasant but *Shigella* does not normally cause a severe or long lasting illness. A person is usually fully recovered within 2 weeks. However, young children and the elderly can become very ill with dehydration and may need to be hospitalised for a short time.

The disease is very serious from the public health point of view because *Shigella* is highly infectious.

Infected people with poor hand-washing hygiene can spread the disease to others very easily.

## How long is someone infectious?

A person is infectious as long as the bacteria are in their system. This varies from person to person but is usually for 4 weeks after the loose faeces (poo) or diarrhoea started.

## How do you get shigellosis?

You can get it from:

- swallowing contaminated food, or water, or sucking contaminated objects (such as children's toys). Food or objects can be contaminated by someone who does not wash their hands after changing the nappy of an infected child, or when a person who is infected does not wash their hands after going to the toilet.

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- from drinking water from rivers, streams, shallow wells, or roof rainwater that has been contaminated by infected people.
- from travelling overseas in countries where there is poor sewerage and drinking water systems, and unhygienic food preparation.
- flies and other insects such as cockroaches can transfer the bacteria from toilets to food.
- sexually, particularly between men who have sex with men.

## Is there any treatment?

Some antibiotics shorten the duration and severity of illness and may be prescribed for severe or prolonged illness. It is always important to drink plenty of fluids to prevent dehydration when you have diarrhoea.

## How do you prevent its spread?

**Always wash and dry your hands** thoroughly after going to the toilet, changing nappies and before and after preparing food. Other measures include disinfection of the toilet seat after use, using a bacterial disinfectant and use of a personal towel.

## What about work, school or early childhood centres?

People who work as food handlers, early childhood workers, or health care workers in high risk occupations must not return to work until they have provided 2 negative faeces (poo) specimens at least 2 days apart.

Children must not go back to early childhood centres (including kindergartens, play centres, kohanga reo, Pacific Island language nests) or school until they have provided 2 negative faeces (poo) specimens at least 2 days apart. Anyone else must not go back to work until they have been free of symptoms for 2 days.

No-one must go swimming in a pool until they have been free of symptoms (especially diarrhoea) for 2 weeks.

Regional Public Health arranges clearance tests to cases and contacts you if you are symptomatic.

## Remember:

If you are travelling overseas (especially to developing countries) be careful about the food that you eat and the water (and ice) that you drink. Do not drink untreated water, use bottled water that is well sealed or boil water.

It may be wise to avoid eating from roadside vendors, but use cafes and restaurants that seem to be clean and hygienic. Thoroughly wash fruit that is eaten unpeeled. Carry alcohol hand gel with you when travelling overseas and use it frequently. Contact Regional Public Health or a travel doctor if you need more information.