

Shigellosis

What is shigellosis?

Shigellosis is an infection caused by a bacterium called *Shigella*.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms usually include diarrhoea, abdominal pain, fever, nausea, vomiting and headaches. Sometimes the diarrhoea can contain blood and mucus.

Symptoms usually start from 24-72 hours after a person becomes infected, but this can be longer in some cases. Most people are sick from 4 to 7 days. Sometimes this can be longer. Some people do not show any symptoms at all. Dehydration can be a complication in young children and the elderly.

How is shigellosis spread?

Shigella is easily spread. It is passed from person to person by the faecal-oral route, by direct or indirect contact with faecal matter. This commonly occurs if hands are not washed properly, particularly after going to the toilet or changing nappies.

Certain types of sexual activity, such as oral-anal sex, allow the transmission of *Shigella* from person to person. *Shigella* infections may also be acquired from eating food or drinking water contaminated with the bacteria either through poor hand hygiene or water contaminated with sewerage.

A person can have *Shigella* present in their faeces for some weeks with no symptoms and still pass infection on to others.

How common is shigellosis?

There are around seven reported cases of shigellosis in the ACT each year, but this can vary. In reality, the actual numbers are probably much higher as not everyone is tested or seeks medical care.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis of Shigellosis requires the isolation of *Shigella* bacteria from a faecal specimen. Your doctor may order this test if you have symptoms.

What treatment is available?

Antibiotics are usually prescribed to reduce the severity and length of illness, and to reduce the amount of time a person is infectious. Most people usually recover with rest and extra fluids.

Who is at risk?

Shigella can infect anyone. People living in conditions of poor hygiene, children, and men who have sex with men are at greatest risk. Infants, the elderly, and people with weak immune systems are more likely to have severe illness. People living in the same household as a person with *Shigella* are also at risk.

Should I be at work or school?

Working in certain occupations when you have a *Shigella* infection can put other people at risk.

- People working as food handlers, in childcare, with the elderly, or in health care settings should not return to work until 48 hours after their diarrhoea has ceased.
- Children with *Shigella* who attend childcare should be excluded for 24 hours after their diarrhoea has ceased.
- All other people can return to work or school 24 hours after their diarrhoea has ceased.

How is it prevented?

Children and adults should not swim in a pool for 24 hours after their diarrhoea has ceased.

Hand washing

Hand washing is a very effective way of preventing cross-contamination and person to person spread of *Shigella*. Hands should be washed with soap and running water for between 10 to 15 seconds:

- Before preparing food,
- Between handling raw and ready to eat food,
- Before eating,
- After going to the toilet or changing nappies.

Safe food handling

Adopting safe food handling techniques can effectively prevent the spread of *Shigella*. Remember to follow these food safety rules:

- Wash raw fruit and vegetables before eating them,
- Keep food preparation areas and utensils clean,
- Use separate cutting boards and utensils when preparing raw foods and ready-to-eat foods,
- Thoroughly cook all raw food, particularly poultry and eggs,
- Avoid using cracked or dirty eggs,
- In the fridge, keep raw foods on a lower shelf than ready-to-eat foods to avoid cross-contamination,
- Keep food below 5°C or above 60°C to prevent bacteria growing,
- Reheat food until the internal temperature is at least 75°C.

Safe sexual practices

People who have shigellosis should not have sex where there is any contact with the anus, to avoid transmitting *Shigella* to the mouth.

Advice for travellers

People travelling to countries where shigellosis is common should also:

- Avoid uncooked foods, including fruit and vegetables, unless you are able to peel them yourself,
- Drink bottled or boiled water,
- Not drink untreated water, including ice and drinks mixed with water,
- Avoid eating from street stalls,
- Ensure hot food is thoroughly cooked and eaten while hot.

Need more information?

For more information about shigellosis, contact your doctor or call the Health Protection Service, Communicable Disease Control Information Line during business hours on (02) 6205 2155.

Communicable Disease Control Section at the Health Protection Service is responsible for the investigation and surveillance of notifiable or infectious conditions in the ACT in order to control or prevent their spread in the community. This includes the promotion of immunisation, education and other strategies that help to limit the spread of diseases.

Shigellosis is a notifiable disease. Cases notified to ACT Health are investigated by Public Health Officers.

Acknowledgement

1. Heymann DL, 2015, Control of Communicable Diseases Manual, 20th edition.

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