

Food Safety Fact Sheet

Foodborne Illness: Shigellosis

What is shigellosis?

Shigellosis is an infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria called Shigella.

How is shigellosis spread?

Shigella are present in the diarrhea of infected persons while they are sick and for up to 1 or 2 weeks afterwards. Most Shigella infections are the result of the bacterium passing from stools or soiled fingers of one person to the mouth of another person. This happens when basic hygiene and hand washing habits are inadequate and also during certain types of sexual activity. It is particularly likely to occur among toddlers who are not fully toilet trained. Family members and playmates of such children are at high risk of becoming infected.

Shigella infections also may be acquired from eating contaminated food. Contaminated food usually looks and smells normal. Food may become contaminated by infected food handlers who forget to wash their hands with soap after using the bathroom. Vegetables can become contaminated if they are harvested from a field that has sewage on it. Flies can breed in infected feces and then contaminate food. Water may become contaminated if sewage feeds into it, or if someone with shigellosis swims in or plays in it (especially in splash tables, untreated wading pools, or shallow play fountains used by daycare centers). Shigella infections can then be acquired by drinking, swimming or playing in the contaminated water.

What are the symptoms?

Most people with shigellosis develop diarrhea, fever and stomach cramps starting 1 or 2 days after they are exposed to the bacteria. The diarrhea is often bloody. Shigellosis usually resolves in 5 to 7 days, and people in the United States who acquire it rarely require hospitalization. A severe infection with high fever may be associated with seizures in children less than 2 years

old. Some people may have it and have no symptoms at all, but they may still pass the bacteria to others.

What can I do to prevent shigellosis?

Infection and transmission of Shigella can be prevented by:

- Consuming water from a safe source.
- Always washing hands after using the bathroom, before preparing or serving meals, and before eating. Wash hands with soap for 20 seconds then rinse with warm running water.
- Washing fruits and vegetables before eating.
- Always washing hands after petting animals and changing diapers.

How is shigellosis treated?

Antibiotics are used to treat shigellosis and are effective in shortening the course of illness.

How common is shigellosis?

About 14,000 cases of shigellosis are reported every year in the United States. Because many milder cases are not diagnosed or reported, the actual number of infections may be much higher. Shigellosis is particularly common and causes recurrent problems in settings where hygiene is poor, and it can sometimes sweep through entire communities. It is more common in summer than winter. Children, especially toddlers aged 2 to 4, are most likely to get shigellosis. Many cases are related to the spread of illness in childcare settings, and many are the result of the spread of the illness in families with small children.