

# Cryptosporidium



Cryptosporidium is a parasite (a tiny organism) that causes an infection called cryptosporidiosis affecting people and cattle. Cryptosporidium is found in lakes, streams and rivers, untreated water and sometimes in swimming pools.

## Who is at risk?

Anyone can get cryptosporidiosis, but it is most common in children aged between one and five years. People who care for, or work with children are more at risk than others. It can be a serious illness in people who have immune systems that are not working properly (including people who have cancer, are having chemotherapy, or have AIDS).

## How do you get cryptosporidiosis?

You can get cryptosporidiosis directly from another person or animal by touching faeces, (for example when changing a nappy) and putting your hands near or in your mouth without washing them thoroughly. You can also get cryptosporidiosis from infected pets or by swimming in, or drinking contaminated water. Occasionally you can be infected by eating and drinking contaminated food, particularly unpasteurised milk, offal (liver, kidneys, and heart) or undercooked meat.

## How can you avoid getting cryptosporidiosis?

- Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water:
  - before preparing and eating food
  - after handling raw food
  - after going to the toilet or changing a baby's nappy
  - after working, feeding, grooming or playing with pets and other animals
- Do not drink untreated water
- Do not use ice or drinking water in countries where the water supply might be unsafe
- Always wash and/or peel fruits and vegetables before eating them
- Do not go swimming if you have diarrhoea. If you have had cryptosporidiosis do not go swimming until you have been clear of diarrhoea for at least two weeks
- Avoid swallowing water in lakes and swimming pools
- You should pay special attention to hygiene during farm visits, washing hands after any contact with animals, and eating only in designated areas

Cryptosporidiosis is highly infectious so you need to be scrupulously clean around your home. Clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins after use. Make sure all members of your household wash their hands thoroughly with soap and hot water after going to the toilet and after handling soiled clothing or bedding.

Make sure that everyone has their own towel and that they do not use anybody else's. Wash all soiled clothes and linen on as hot a machine wash as possible.

## What are the symptoms of cryptosporidiosis and how long do they last?

Symptoms include watery diarrhoea, stomach pains, dehydration, weight loss and fever which could last for up to three weeks but it can affect people with weak immune systems for much longer. You might think that you are getting better and have shaken off the infection but then find that you get worse before the illness eventually goes. As symptoms are similar to many other infections, the only way to make an accurate diagnosis is for a sample of your faeces to be tested in a laboratory.

## How do you treat cryptosporidiosis?

There is no specific treatment for cryptosporidiosis. Most people with a healthy immune system will recover within one month.

It is important to drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration and you can lose important sugars and minerals from your body. Your doctor may recommend a re-hydration solution, available from your pharmacist.

- If you feel sick, try taking small sips of fluid, frequently
- Avoid tea, coffee, carbonated drinks or alcohol
- Always dilute sugary drinks even if you would not normally dilute them
- A simple painkiller like paracetamol can help combat any pain

## Do I need to stay off work or school?

Yes. While you are ill and have symptoms you are infectious. You should not return to work or school until you have been free from diarrhoea and/or vomiting for 48 hours.

You should tell your employer you have had cryptosporidiosis if you work with vulnerable groups such as the elderly, the young, those in poor health, or if you handle food.

## The Health Protection Agency and cryptosporidiosis

We provide advice on controlling outbreaks. We look for the source of the infection, so that we can help to prevent other people from becoming infected. We also monitor outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis and look for any patterns or trends which show possible connections between the people who are affected.

More information about the Health Protection Agency and cryptosporidiosis is available on our website at <http://www.hpa.org.uk>

If you have concerns about your health contact NHS Direct on 0845 4647, visit their website <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk>, or see your family doctor.

If you have any further questions,  
please contact

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