

What is Cryptosporidium?

Cryptosporidiosis is a disease caused by a tiny parasite, known as Cryptosporidium, that can cause infection in the gut. Cryptosporidium can be found in lakes, streams, rivers, untreated water and sometimes in swimming pools. It can also be found in soil or food, on surfaces, or on dirty hands that have been contaminated by infected people or animals.

What are the symptoms and how long do they last?

The most common symptom is watery diarrhoea.

Other possible symptoms include stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, and fever. Symptoms usually start within 2 to 10 days (average seven days) after being exposed.

Most people who have a healthy immune system will get better within 1 to 2 weeks. Some people may have prolonged diarrhoea, and some may have no symptoms at all.

Who can get Cryptosporidium?

Anyone can get a Cryptosporidium infection, but it is most common in:

- children under five years old;
- people who care for children;
- people who have contact with farm animals;
- People who swallow untreated or contaminated water while camping or swimming.

How do you get infected with Cryptosporidium?

Cryptosporidium lives in the gut of infected humans or animals. An infected person or animal has Cryptosporidium parasites in their faeces (poo) while they are unwell, and for up to several weeks after symptoms stop.

You can become infected through contact with a person or animal who has the illness, or through contact with contaminated surfaces or objects.

It is also possible to get infected by swimming in, or drinking, contaminated water. This may include rivers, ponds, lakes, and swimming pools, as the parasite is not killed by chlorine.

Sometimes contaminated food, such as unwashed vegetables or raw milk, can pass on the parasite too.

What can you do to prevent Cryptosporidium infection?

Wash your hands thoroughly with soap and warm water at these key times:

- before preparing and eating food;
- after handling raw food;
- after using or cleaning the toilet;
- after attending anyone with diarrhoea or vomiting;
- after touching anything contaminated by diarrhoea or vomiting;
- after changing a baby's nappy;
- after contact with pets or livestock;
- after working in the garden.

Alcohol-based gels should not be used as a substitute for soap and water, as these do **not** kill *Cryptosporidium*.

Other measures to consider:

- avoid drinking untreated water from lakes, rivers or streams;
- avoid swallowing water when swimming in lakes and pools;
- if you are visiting countries where water hygiene standards are poor, choose bottled water and never add ice to your drinks.

Visiting farms

Pay special attention to hygiene during farm visits, wash your hands after any contact with animals, and eat only in designated areas.

How can you protect others in the household?

Here are some actions to prevent the spread of infection:

- everyone in the household should wash their hands thoroughly with soap and warm water after going to the toilet, after handling soiled clothing or bedding, and before preparing/eating food;
- the infected person should not prepare or serve food for others;
- clean toilet seats, toilet bowls, flush handles, taps and wash hand basins after use with detergent and hot water, followed by a household disinfectant;
- everyone in the house should have their own towel and they should not use anyone else's;

- wash the infected person's laundry separately from other clothes at high temperatures.

What are the symptoms of *Cryptosporidium* infection and how long do they last?

Most people have watery diarrhoea. Other possible symptoms include stomach pains, vomiting, fever, fatigue, loss of appetite, headache and muscle pain.

Symptoms usually last for around 1 to 2 weeks in people who have healthy immune systems. The infection can be more serious and symptoms may last longer in people who have immune systems that are not working properly. Some people will have no symptoms at all.

Most symptoms resolve within four weeks.

How are *Cryptosporidium* infections treated?

There is no specific treatment for *Cryptosporidium* infection. Most healthy people will recover within one month.

It is advised that you drink plenty of fluids as diarrhoea or vomiting can lead to dehydration. If you feel sick and have difficulty keeping fluids down, try taking small sips of fluid frequently. Avoid hydrating with tea, coffee, carbonated drinks and alcohol. Your doctor may recommend a rehydration solution from your local pharmacist.

Always contact your doctor or seek medical advice if any of the following apply:

- your symptoms are severe or do not improve after a few days;

- you have a high temperature (fever) of 38°C (100.4°F) or over;
- you have symptoms of dehydration, such as sunken eyes and passing small quantities of dark, strong smelling urine;
- you have a baby with symptoms;
- you have an immune system that is not working properly.

Should I 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 vomiting for at least 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.

Children should not attend school/childcare or play with other children until they are fully recovered and symptom free for at least 48 hours

If you have had a *Cryptosporidium* infection, do not go swimming or use hot tubs or Jacuzzis until you have been free from diarrhoea **for at least two weeks**. This will protect other people from catching the infection.



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