

What is shigellosis?

Shigellosis is an infection caused by shigella bacteria, which affects the gastrointestinal tract (or the gut). There are several different species of shigella including: shigella sonnei, shigella flexneri, shigella boydii, and shigella dysenteriae.

Most people who are infected with shigella will have diarrhoea, sometimes containing blood. The illness can also cause stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting, and fever. Symptoms may last for up to two weeks, and you are infectious to others while you are ill.

Who can get Shigellosis?

Anyone can get shigellosis. Shigella bacteria is spread through contact with contaminated surfaces, or contaminated food, water, or objects, passed to your mouth. Shigella spreads easily and swallowing just a small amount of shigella germs can make you sick.

How can I reduce the risk of shigella 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;
- before and after sexual activity.

Avoid swallowing water from ponds, rivers, lakes or swimming pools.

If you are visiting countries where water hygiene standards may be poor, choose bottled water, never add ice to your drinks and avoid uncooked foods, such as fruit and salads, that you have not washed with bottled or boiled water. If your partner has been diagnosed with shigellosis, you should avoid sexual contact whilst they are unwell and for at least two weeks after they have recovered.

How do I protect my household and reduce the risk of spreading the infection?

Here are some actions you can take to prevent the spread of infection:

- handwashing is the most important way to stop 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 until symptom free for at least 48 hours;
- 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 at high temperatures.

Avoid sexual activity for at least one week after symptoms resolve.

How is shigella treated?

Most healthy people with mild forms of shigellosis will recover without any specific treatment within a few days to a week. While observing the measures to reduce the risk of spread to others; 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.

Shigellosis can be treated with antibiotics. If you have bloody diarrhoea, or a more moderate to severe form of the illness, you should contact your doctor or seek medical advice. Always contact your doctor if any of the following apply:

- your symptoms are moderate or 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.

Do I need to stay off school or work?

Yes, you should stay off school or work while you are ill and have symptoms, as you are infectious to other people. Some people with shigellosis may be able to return to work or school once they have been symptom free for at least 48 hours. As shigella is easily passed onto others, some people need to have a stool (poo) sample tested and be given the all clear before returning to work, school, nursery or a childminder. The type of shigella you have, and whether or not you are in a risk group will influence how long you need to stay away. Risk groups are people in certain occupations, including healthcare workers and people who handle food, as well as people who need help with personal hygiene, and very young children. The Health Protection Team in the Public Health Agency or local Environmental Health Department will advise you regarding this.

Shigellosis: more advice

In addition to advice regarding hand hygiene, safe food handling, personal hygiene and returning to work, there is further advice for protecting against shigella during sexual activity.

Sexually transmitted shigella is spread by the bacteria getting into the mouth during sex or via unwashed hands. Swallowing only a very small amount of the bacteria can cause infection. Some particular risk factors for this include anal-oral sex ("rimming"), and giving oral sex after anal sex.

Gay or bisexual men who have sex with men (GBMSM) are at higher risk of becoming infected with shigella.

People can protect themselves from picking up shigella infection through sexual activity by:

- changing condoms between anal and oral sex;
- using a barrier if performing rimming, such as a square of latex;
- washing hands after sex;
- showering after sex to wash your bottom and penis;
- washing sex toys or equipment and not sharing these;
- using latex gloves for fingering or fisting.

Should I tell my sexual partner?

Yes. If you have shigellosis, you should avoid sexual contact for at least seven days after symptoms resolve. If your partner has symptoms of shigella infection, they should speak to their doctor. If your doctor thinks you got shigella through sex they may advise other tests for sexually transmitted infections.

When can I have sex again?

Avoid having sex for at least seven days after symptoms have stopped to avoid infecting others.



Public Health Agency, 12-22 Linenhall Street,
Belfast BT2 8BS. Tel: 028 90 321 313
www.publichealth.hscni.net