

Shigellosis

Information Sheet

What is Shigellosis?

Shigellosis is an acute bacterial disease commonly called dysentery.

What are the symptoms?

Shigella causes diarrhea (often bloody), accompanied by fever, nausea and, sometimes, vomiting and stomach cramps.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear 12 to 96 hours after swallowing the bacteria. Some cases can be quite severe and symptoms can last for several days or several weeks, with an average of 4 to 7 days.

The disease is more severe in children than it is in adults. It is associated with Haemolytic Uraemic Syndrome (HUS), a leading cause of kidney failure in the elderly and young children. Symptoms of HUS include irritability, fatigue, paleness of the skin, puffiness around the eyes and ankles, and a decrease in the amount of urine produced.

How does it spread?

People are the only significant source for Shigella bacteria. The bacteria are found in the intestines of infected people. Shigella bacteria can be spread for as long as the organism can be isolated from a person's stool. Most people pass Shigella in their faeces (stool) for one to two weeks. People who go to the washroom, and do not wash their hands properly, can pass the disease to others directly by physical contact (touching) or indirectly through food preparation. Infection can occur after the ingestion of very few organisms (10 to 100). Because it takes so few organisms to cause illness, person-to-person spread between family members is common.

Shigellosis can also be spread by drinking water contaminated with sewage. Flies may also transfer the organisms on their feet after being in contact with infected faeces and then landing on uncovered food left at room temperature.

How do you prevent Shigella infections?

Thorough hand washing is the best prevention. Make sure hands are properly washed after using the toilet, handling diapers or before preparing food.

- Infected people should not work as food handlers or provide daycare until they are Shigella free.
- Drink water from a safe supply. Boil water for at least 5 minutes or drink bottled water when traveling if you are unsure of the supply. Remember that ice cubes could also be contaminated.
- Avoid swimming in water that may be contaminated.