

# *Cryptosporidium* Infection

## COMMUNICABLE DISEASE CONTROL

### What is *cryptosporidium*?

*Cryptosporidium parvum* is a tiny parasite that can live in the intestines of humans and animals and is passed in the bowel movement of an infected person or animal. An outer shell protects the parasite. This protective shell allows the parasite to survive outside the body for long periods of time and makes it highly resistant to chlorine disinfection.

*Cryptosporidium* is also called “crypto.”

### How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms generally begin one to 10 days after being infected.

### What are the symptoms of *cryptosporidium* infection?

Symptoms include diarrhea, loose or watery stool (i.e., poop), stomach cramps, upset stomach, weight loss, loss of appetite and a slight fever. Some people have no symptoms.

### How long do symptoms last?

Symptoms usually last about two weeks but may come and go for up to 30 days. *Cryptosporidium* may be present in stool for up to two months after symptoms end.

### Who is at risk of *cryptosporidium* infection?

Everyone is at risk. However, some people are more at risk than others, in particular people with weakened immune systems. For these persons, symptoms may be more severe and can lead to serious or life-threatening illness.

Examples of persons with weakened immune systems include those with HIV/AIDS, cancer and transplant patients who are taking certain immunosuppressive drugs and anyone with a genetic immune system deficiency.

If you have a severely weakened immune system, consult your health care provider for more information.

### How is an infection diagnosed?

The infection is diagnosed by collecting and testing stool samples. Testing for *cryptosporidium* may be difficult. This is why your health care provider may ask you to submit several stool samples over several days.

### Can *cryptosporidium* infection be treated?

There is no antibiotic or drug treatment that will cure *cryptosporidium*. Most people with a healthy immune system will recover on their own. Severe illness should be managed under the care of a physician.

### How is *cryptosporidium* infection spread?

The infection is spread when a person swallows something that has come in contact with the stool of a person or animal carrying *cryptosporidium*. Examples include:

- swallowing contaminated water from swimming pools, hot tubs, jacuzzis, lakes, rivers, springs, ponds or streams. Water from these sources can become contaminated with *cryptosporidium* by sewage or other contact with human or animal feces (i.e., poop). “Crypto” is chlorine-resistant and can live for days in swimming pools.
- eating uncooked food contaminated with *cryptosporidium*. This is one reason why you should always thoroughly wash with safe water (boiled or bottled), all vegetables and fruits you plan to eat raw.
- swallowing *cryptosporidium* picked up from surfaces that have been in contact with stool from an infected person (ex: toys, bathroom fixtures, change tables, diaper pails).

### How can I prevent *cryptosporidium* infection?

- Wash your hands with soap and water before and after using the toilet, changing diapers and before eating or preparing food.

- Do not drink unpasteurized milk or milk products.
- Do not drink water from lakes, rivers, springs, ponds or streams unless it has been filtered or chemically treated.
- When traveling where the water supply may be unsafe, avoid drinking unboiled tap water and avoid uncooked foods washed with unboiled tap water. Pasteurized fruit drinks are safe to drink, as are steaming hot coffee and tea.
- Avoid swimming in pools if you have diarrhea for at least two weeks after diarrhea stops. You can pass *cryptosporidium* in your stool and contaminate water for several weeks after you no longer have symptoms. *Cryptosporidium* can survive in chlorinated pools for several days.
- Avoid sex that involves contact with stool.
- If you have symptoms of *cryptosporidium* infection or any illness with diarrhea, you should not handle or prepare food. Once symptoms have cleared up, you may return to regular food handling and preparation activities, but you must still be very careful to wash your hands frequently and regularly.
- **Use filtered tap water** – Not all filters remove *cryptosporidium*. Those with the following labels are safe to use:
  - Tested and certified by NSF Standard 53 for cyst removal
  - Reverse osmosis
  - Absolute micron size of one micron or smaller
- **Use bottled water** – Not all bottled water is the same. Look for a label that says:
  - Reverse osmosis treated
  - Distilled
  - Filtered through an absolute one micron or smaller filter

Commercially-packaged, noncarbonated soft drinks and fruit juices that do not require refrigeration until after they are opened (i.e., can be stored unrefrigerated) are also safe.

Nationally distributed brands of bottled or canned carbonated soft drinks are considered safe from *cryptosporidium*.

### For more information

For more information about *cryptosporidium* infection, please contact your local public health nurse or call Health Links-Info Santé in Winnipeg, 788-8200 or toll-free elsewhere in Manitoba 1-888-315-9257.

### What else do I need to know?

There are extra steps you can take to reduce your risk of exposure to *cryptosporidium*.

- **Boil water** – Boil water for one minute, put it in a clean bottle and store it in the refrigerator. To be safe, make your ice from the boiled water.

