

Amebiasis (Amebic Dysentery)

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis is an intestinal illness caused by a microscopic parasite called *Entamoeba histolytica*.

Who gets amebiasis?

Anyone can get amebiasis but it occurs more often in people arriving from tropical or subtropical areas, individuals in institutions for the developmentally disabled, and homosexual males.

How is this parasite spread?

Most people get amebiasis by eating or drinking contaminated food or water. It can also be spread by oral-anal contact.

What are the symptoms of amebiasis?

People exposed to this parasite may experience mild or severe symptoms or no symptoms at all. Fortunately, most exposed people do not become seriously ill. The symptoms of amebiasis include diarrhea (that may be bloody), nausea, weight loss, abdominal tenderness and occasional fever. Rarely, the parasite will invade the body beyond the intestines and cause a more serious infection, such as a liver abscess.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The symptoms may appear from a few days to a few months after exposure but usually within two to four weeks.

How long can an infected person carry this parasite?

Some people with amebiasis may carry the parasite for weeks to years, often without symptoms.

Where are the parasites that cause amebiasis found?

Infected people are the only sources of the parasite. Fecal material (stools) from infected people may contaminate water or food which may then cause spread to other people.

How is it diagnosed?

Examination of stools under a microscope is the most common way for a doctor to diagnose amebiasis. Sometimes, several stool samples must be obtained because the number of amoeba found in the stool changes from day to day.

Do infected people need to be excluded from work or school?

Generally, it is not necessary to exclude an infected person from work or school. Casual contact at work or school is unlikely to transmit the disease, provided that infected persons carefully wash their hands after using the toilet. The health department will assess each situation in which the person with amebiasis is a foodhandler, health care worker, or day care worker or attendee.

What is the treatment for amebiasis?

Specific antibiotics can be prescribed by a doctor to treat amebiasis. Once a person is treated, the person will no longer carry the parasite in the intestinal tract and is not likely to become ill with amebiasis again.

How can amebiasis be prevented?

The most important precaution is careful handwashing after each toilet visit and before preparing and/or eating food.