Cryptosporidium

Patient Information Leaflet

What is Cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis is a parasitic infection. This parasite is a common cause of disease in man and in domestic animals such as sheep and cattle. Most of the human cases occur in children under the age of 15. The disease is most common in Spring and Autumn. This coincides with the lambing and calving seasons. Cryptosporidiosis is also a common cause of ‘travellers diarrhoea’.

What are the symptoms?

The time between swallowing the parasite and symptoms starting, the incubation time, is between 1 and 28 days but it is usually around 7-10 days. Symptoms include:

- Frequent watery diarrhoea
- Abdominal/stomach cramps
- Fever
- Occasionally vomiting and loss of appetite
- Headache

People who have a major problem with their immune system e.g. HIV, may have a more severe illness.

How does it spread?

Transmission to humans is by ingestion (swallowing) of the parasite found in infected animal or human faeces (faeco-oral spread). The main routes of spread are:

- Through drinking contaminated water. Contamination of water may occur from farming activities or human sewage. The parasite may not be killed by chlorination which is a common method of treating water therefore water needs to be treated by other methods to remove this parasite.

- Person to person. This can occur particularly in families or community groups e.g. playgroups, where there is a breakdown in hygiene practices.

- Direct contact with infected farm animals e.g. farms visits where people do not wash their hands carefully before eating. The parasite can survive in the environment for months.

- By drinking contaminated raw (unpasteurised) milk.

- Infection has also been linked with swimming pools. This is usually as a result of accidental faecal contamination.
What precautions do I have to take?

1. Thorough handwashing taking care to clean the fingertips and between the fingers after and before:
   - handling animals
   - changing nappies
   - visiting the toilet
   - handling food
   - eating
2. Make sure food is thoroughly cooked
3. Do not reuse chopping boards, kitchen surfaces or kitchen knives without first washing them thoroughly.
4. Avoid drinking unpasteurised (raw) milk or milk in bottles where the tops have been pecked by birds.
5. Remember cooked meat should be stored at the top of the fridge and uncooked meat at the bottom.
6. Thoroughly wash all salad vegetables and fruit before consumption.

Will I need treatment?

There is no effective treatment for Cryptosporidiosis. In healthy people it may only be necessary to make sure that enough fluids are taken to replace those lost due to the diarrhoea. However your GP may advise treatment if you have other medical conditions.

In most cases patients can return to work when they have been symptom free for 48 hours. Remember that the food industry may have their own guidelines regarding exclusion from work.

Please do not go swimming in communal swimming pools until you have been free of symptoms for at least 14 days.

Cryptosporidium and Rural Water Supplies

If you have a private water supply:
- Cover and fence off your supply so animals can not get to it.
- Divert rainwater run off so that it cannot get into your supply.
- Make local farmers aware of your supply to avoid contamination by farming activity.
- Always make sure that your supply is well maintained.
- If the water becomes a different colour after heavy rainfall then boil all drinking water or use another source of water.

Your local Council’s Environmental Health Department can give you further advice on your water supply.

This leaflet is also available in large print and on computer disk. Other formats can be supplied on request. Please call the Health Protection Team on 01224 558520 for a copy.