



Whatcom County Health Department

FACT SHEET: SHIGELLOSIS

What is shigellosis?

Shigellosis is a common infection caused by four major groups of *Shigella*. These bacteria affect humans, primarily causing intestinal tract infections. Annually there may be 200 to 800 cases in Washington.

How does a person get shigellosis?

- The bacteria are spread from person to person. A small number of organisms (10 to 100 organisms) can cause infection.
- *Shigella* from an infected person is passed to other individuals when hands are not washed properly or during certain sexual practices.
- Food and water contaminated by an infected individual can also spread the disease.

Who gets shigellosis?

- Anyone who is exposed to *Shigella* bacteria can get shigellosis.
- Most severe cases are in children, the elderly and people with a weakened immune system.

What are the symptoms of shigellosis?

- Symptoms can include bloody and/or watery diarrhea, fevers, abdominal cramping, nausea and occasionally vomiting.
- Some infected individuals may be completely asymptomatic.
- The symptoms generally appear one to three days after exposure.
- Complications include seizures, particularly for children, and Reiters syndrome (joint pains, irritation of the eyes, and painful urination) for genetically susceptible individuals.

When is an infected person contagious?

- The infectious period can vary from onset of symptoms up to four weeks or longer.

- Asymptomatic carriers can transmit the disease for months.
- Infected food handlers, health care workers, and individuals associated with daycare must obtain the approval of their local health department before returning to work or daycare.

What is the treatment for shigellosis?

- Mild cases usually resolve without antibiotics.
- Antibiotics are useful to help shorten the length of time the individual is contagious.
- Antidiarrheal medications can make the illness worse and should not be used.

How can we prevent shigellosis?

- Wash your hands with soap and warm water before and after handling foods, after using the bathroom, or after changing a baby's diaper.
- Make sure children wash their hands properly.
- If a child in diapers has shigellosis, dispose of the diaper in a closed-lid garbage can and disinfect the diaper changing area. The adult and child should wash hands with soap and warm water immediately after changing the diaper.
- Never prepare food for other people if you have diarrhea, including shigellosis.
- Do not swim in pools or lakes if you have diarrhea.

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For more information, or to report a shigellosis case, call the Whatcom County Health Department at (360) 676-6724.