



Frequently asked questions about Cryptosporidiosis

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

What is Cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis is a disease that causes diarrhea. It is caused by microscopic parasites called *Cryptosporidium*. These parasites can live in the intestine of humans and animals. The disease is passed in the stool of an infected person or animal. Both the disease and the parasite are commonly known as "Crypto." The parasite can survive outside the body for long periods of time and is very resistant to chlorine-based disinfectants. Crypto is one of the most common causes of waterborne disease in humans in the United States. It can be found in both recreational water and drinking water

How is Cryptosporidiosis spread?

Crypto lives in the intestine. The disease can be transmitted from the time the infected person develops symptoms and can last for weeks after the symptoms (e.g., diarrhea) stop. A person becomes infected by accidentally swallowing the parasite.

Crypto is spread by:

- Putting something in your mouth or drinking water or beverages that have come into contact with stool of an infected person or animal.
- Swallowing recreational water contaminated with *Crypto*. Recreational water includes water from swimming pools, hot tubs, Jacuzzis, fountains, lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, or streams.
- Eating uncooked food contaminated with *Crypto*. Thoroughly wash vegetables and fruits you plan to eat raw with uncontaminated water.
- Touching your mouth with contaminated hands. Hands can become contaminated through a variety of activities, such as touching surfaces (e.g., toys, bathroom fixtures, changing tables, and diaper pails) that have been contaminated, changing diapers, caring for an infected person, and/or handling an infected cow or calf.
- Exposure through sexual contact.

What are the symptoms of Cryptosporidiosis?

The most common symptom of *Crypto* is watery diarrhea. Other symptoms include:

- Stomach cramps or pain
- Fluid loss (Dehydration)
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Fever
- Weight loss

Some people with *Crypto* will have no symptoms at all. The small intestine is the site most commonly affected; however, *Crypto* can infect other areas of the digestive tract or the respiratory tract.

How long after infection do symptoms appear?

Symptoms of *Crypto* generally begin 2 to 10 days (average 7 days) after infection.

How long will symptoms last?

In persons with healthy immune systems, symptoms usually last about 1 to 2 weeks. The symptoms may go in cycles. You may feel better for a few days then feel worse again before the illness ends.

Who is most at risk for Cryptosporidiosis?

People who are most likely to become infected with *Crypto* include:

- Children who attend day care centers, including diaper-aged children
- Child care workers
- Parents of infected children
- People who take care of other people with *Crypto*
- International travelers
- Backpackers, hikers, and campers who drink unfiltered, untreated water
- People who drink from untreated shallow, unprotected wells
- People, including swimmers, who swallow water from contaminated sources
- People who handle infected cattle
- People exposed to through sexual contact

Contaminated water may include water that has not been boiled or filtered, as well as contaminated recreational water sources (e.g., swimming pools, lakes, rivers, ponds, and streams)..

Who is most at risk for getting seriously ill with Cryptosporidiosis?

Although *Crypto* can infect all people, some groups are likely to develop more serious illness.

- Young children and pregnant women may be more susceptible to the dehydration resulting from diarrhea and should drink plenty of fluids while ill.
- If you have a severely weakened immune system, including AIDS, cancer or transplant patients, you are at risk for more serious disease. Your symptoms may be more severe and could lead to serious or life-threatening illness.

What should I do if I think I may have Cryptosporidiosis?

If you suspect that you have *Crypto*, see your health care provider for treatment options. Most people who have healthy immune systems will recover without treatment. Preventing dehydration from diarrhea by drinking plenty of fluids is of utmost importance. Remember: young children and pregnant women may be at more risk for dehydration and dehydration caused by diarrhea may be life threatening for infants.

People in poor health or with weakened immune systems may be at higher risk for more severe and prolonged illness and should contact their health provider for medical treatment.

How is a Cryptosporidiosis diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask you to submit stool samples to see if you are infected. Because testing for *Crypto* can be difficult, you may be asked to submit several stool specimens over several days. Tests for *Crypto* are not routinely done in most laboratories. Therefore, your health care provider should specifically request testing for the parasite.

If I have been exposed to *Crypto* and have symptoms and/or have been diagnosed as having *Crypto*, should I worry about spreading the infection to others?

Yes, *Crypto* can be very contagious. Infected individuals should follow these guidelines to avoid spreading the disease to others:

- Wash your hands frequently with soap and water, especially after using the toilet, after changing diapers, and before eating or preparing food. **Note:** *Crypto* is also alcohol resistant. Alcohol gels and hand sanitizers are of little use in controlling an outbreak.
- Food handlers, healthcare workers and daycare workers should not return to the workplace until 24 hours have passed since their last bout of diarrhea. Even after symptoms go away, a person may still be infected. These workers must practice very good hand-washing and hygiene in order to avoid possible transmission of the disease to others.
- Do not swim in recreational water (pools, hot tubs, lakes, rivers, oceans, etc.) if you have cryptosporidiosis and for at least 2 weeks after the diarrhea stops. You may not be protected in a chlorinated recreational water venue (e.g., swimming pool, water-park, splash pad, spray park) because *Crypto* is chlorine-resistant and can live for days in chlorine-treated water. You can pass *Crypto* in your stool and contaminate water for several weeks after your symptoms have ended. You do not even need to have a fecal accident in the water. Immersion in the water may be enough for contamination to occur. Water contaminated in this manner has resulted in outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis among recreational water users.
- Avoid sexual practices that might result in exposure.
- Avoid close contact with anyone who has a weakened immune system.
- Children with diarrhea should be excluded from child care settings until the diarrhea has stopped.

How do I clean contaminated items that could have been exposed to Crypto?

Cleaning items or surfaces possibly infected can be difficult because the parasite is resistant to common disinfectants.

- Large surfaces can be cleaned with soap and hot water and left in the hot sun to dry. This form of ‘extreme drying’ will help to remove and kill some of the parasites.
- Contaminated clothing items or other items that can be washed should be cleaned by heating the items to 113° F for 20 minutes, 122° F for 5 minutes, or 162° F for 1 minute. A standard washer and dryer or dishwasher that is set on ‘hot’ should be at a sufficient temperature to kill the parasites.
- Counter tops or other items that can’t be easily cleaned in a machine, can be soaked in a 3% hydrogen peroxide solution for 20 minutes and then rinsed thoroughly. This method has been shown to have a 99% kill rate. **Note:** Bleach has not been shown to be effective in killing *Crypto*. **Remember: DO NOT mix bleach and hydrogen peroxide together. The two chemicals can react violently.**
- A chemical disinfection with 10% formalin or 5% ammonia solution has also been shown to be effective in killing *Crypto*.

For more information about other waterborne illnesses and other important health information, visit us on the web:

www.bhsj.org

Or call your local Health Department office at:

**Coldwater
279-9561 x 105**

**Hillsdale
437-7395 x 110**

**Three Rivers
273-2161 x 241**