FACTSHEET

SHIGELLOSIS

WHAT IS SHIGELLOSIS?
Shigellosis is a bacterial disease caused by infection with 
*Shigella* bacteria. Shigellosis can affect anyone; however, 
children, people with poor immune systems, and the elderly 
are at the greatest risk.

HOW DO YOU CATCH SHIGELLOSIS?
Shigellosis is passed from person to person by the faecal–
oral route, by direct or indirect contact with faecal material. 
This commonly occurs if hands are not washed properly, 
particularly after going to the toilet or changing nappies, 
and as a result of sexual contact. Shigella infections may 
also be acquired from eating food contaminated with the 
bacteria. Flies can also carry *Shigella* and can contaminate 
food.

A person can have *Shigella* present in their stools for some 
weeks and remain asymptomatic, and still pass on infection 
to others.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?
Infection with *Shigella* usually results in diarrhoea, fever, 
nausea, vomiting, and stomach cramps. The stool may often 
have blood or mucus in it. The symptoms begin 1–7 days 
(usually 1–3 days) after exposure. Symptoms usually last 
4–7 days but sometimes longer.

HOW IS SHIGELLOSIS DIAGNOSED?
Diagnosis of shigellosis requires the isolation of *Shigella* 
bacteria from a stool specimen. Your doctor may order 
this test.

WHAT IS THE TREATMENT FOR SHIGELLOSIS?
People with mild infections will usually recover without 
treatment. Drinking increased amounts of fluid is important 
to avoid dehydration. Young children (particularly infants) 
are susceptible to dehydration from diarrhoea, and parents 
should seek medical attention. Antibiotics including 
ampicillin, trimethoprim–sulfamethoxazole and 
ciprofloxacin, can be used to treat severe *Shigella* 
infections. However, some *Shigella* have become resistant 
to antibiotics and using antibiotics to treat mild cases of 
shigellosis can make the bacteria more resistant in the 
future. For this reason, usually only severe cases of 
shigellosis will be treated with antibiotics.

The use of anti-diarrhoeal drugs is not recommended.

HOW IS IT PREVENTED?
Thorough washing of vegetables and fruit that is eaten raw 
is recommended.

Thorough handwashing with soap and water is the most 
important way to avoid contamination and infection. 
Hands should be washed after:

- going to the toilet;
- changing nappies;
- any exposures to faecal material.

People with shigellosis should avoid work and should 
not prepare food while they are sick. Sick children, 
particularly those in nappies, should be kept home from 
preschool while they have diarrhoea. Children and adults 
should avoid swimming until diarrhoea has stopped.

People who work as food handlers or who care for children 
or the elderly should not return to their duties until 
diarrhoea has stopped and two stool samples—taken at 
least 24 hours apart and at least two days after any 
antibiotics have finished—test negative for *Shigella*.

For further information please contact your local public 
health unit, community health centre, or doctor.

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