



Frequently asked questions about

Shigella

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

What is shigella?

Shigella is an infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria. Most that are infected with Shigella develop diarrhea, fever, and stomach cramps starting a day or two after they are exposed to the bacterium.

Shigellosis usually goes away in 5 to 7 days. Some persons who are infected may have no symptoms at all, but may still pass the Shigella bacteria to others.

How can Shigella infections be diagnosed?

Shigella is most commonly diagnosed by laboratory tests of the stools of an infected person. The laboratory can also do special tests to tell which type of Shigella the person has and which antibiotics, if any, would be best to treat it.

How can Shigella infections be treated?

Shigellosis can usually be treated with antibiotics. Persons with mild infections will usually recover quickly without antibiotic treatment. Therefore, when many persons in a community are affected by shigellosis, antibiotics are sometimes used selectively to treat only the more severe cases.

Are there long term consequences to a Shigella infection?

Persons with diarrhea usually recover completely, although it may be several months before their bowel habits are entirely normal. Once someone has had shigellosis, they are not likely to get infected with that specific type again for at least several years.

How do people catch Shigella?

The Shigella bacteria pass from one infected person to the next. Shigella are present in the diarrheal stools of infected persons while they are sick and for a week or two afterwards. Most Shigella infections are the result of the bacterium passing from stools or soiled fingers of one person to the mouth of another person. It is particularly likely to occur among toddlers who are not fully toilet-trained. Family members and playmates of such children are at high risk of becoming infected. Additionally, Shigella infections may be acquired from eating contaminated food.

What can a person do to prevent this illness?

There is no vaccine to prevent shigellosis. However, the spread of Shigella from an infected person to other persons can be stopped by:

- wash hands with soap carefully and frequently, especially after going to the bathroom, after changing diapers, and before preparing foods or beverages
- dispose of soiled diapers properly
- disinfect diaper changing areas after using them
- keep children with diarrhea out of child care settings
- supervise hand washing of toddlers and small children after they use the toilet
- persons with diarrheal illness should not prepare food for others
- if you are traveling to the developing world, "boil it, cook it, peel it, or forget it"
- Avoid drinking pool water.

How common is shigellosis?

Every year, about 13,000 cases of shigellosis are reported in the United States. Because many milder cases are not diagnosed or reported, the actual number of infections may be twenty times greater. Shigellosis is particularly common and causes recurrent problems in settings where hygiene is poor and can sometimes sweep through entire communities. Shigellosis is more common in summer than winter. Children, especially toddlers aged 2 to 4, are the most likely to get shigellosis. Many cases are related to the spread of illness in child-care settings, and many more are the result of the spread of the illness in families with small children.

What else can be done to prevent shigellosis?

When a community-wide outbreak occurs, a community-wide approach to promote hand washing and basic hygiene among children can stop the outbreak.

Additional information about this disease can be found on the web at:

http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dbmd/diseaseinfo/shigellosis_g.htm

For more information about shigella from your local health department and other important health information, visit us on the web at:

www.bhsj.org

Or call your local Health Department office at:

Coldwater
279-9561 x 141

Hillsdale
437-7395 x 110

Sturgis
659-4013 x 109

Three Rivers
273-2161 x 241