

Cryptosporidiosis Fact Sheet

What is Cryptosporidiosis?

Cryptosporidiosis (generally known as Crypto) is a disease caused by a microscopic parasite which if swallowed can cause diarrhoea. Crypto is most common in children aged 1-5 and in young adults.

Where does Crypto come from?

Crypto are found in the intestines of animals and humans. Crypto cysts are always present in the environment at low levels, but higher levels are common in the spring particularly during periods of heavy rain when the cysts are washed into the ground and into rivers and lakes. Crypto in manure slurry may contaminate fields, rivers and vegetable crops.

What are the symptoms?

You need to swallow only a few Crypto cysts to make you ill. After swallowing the organisms, symptoms can take up to 10 days to develop but the average is 3-5 days. The most common symptoms are:

- Profuse watery diarrhoea.
- Stomach cramps.
- Vomiting.
- Fever.
- Weight loss.

Symptoms normally last for between 1 and 3 weeks and some people may have no symptoms. The disease is more serious for people who have problems with their immune system. There is no specific treatment for Crypto infection.

How can I catch Crypto?

The most common routes of infection are:

- **Contact with infected persons.** Crypto can be spread between people very easily. This can happen if there is inadequate hand washing after using the toilet or changing nappies. You can also pick up Crypto from surfaces such as toys, changing tables or bathroom surfaces contaminated by an infected person
- **Contaminated drinking water.** Generally drinking water is safe but supplies can become contaminated if the source that the water is taken from becomes polluted.
- **Swallowing contaminated recreational waters.** Swimming pool water can become contaminated by swimmers who are suffering with or recovering from Crypto. Ponds, lakes and rivers can become contaminated from surface water run off or farm slurry.
- **Contact with infected animals.** Cattle, sheep and domestic pets such as cats and dogs can carry the parasite especially if they have diarrhoea.
- **Eating contaminated raw foods, such as raw milk, raw meat and fruit and vegetables.** Fruit and vegetables can become contaminated from a polluted water source or from contact with manure or farm slurry. The parasite can pass from an infected cow into the milk. However, most milk sold in this country is heat treated eg: pasteurised which makes the milk safe to drink.

How will I know if I have Crypto?

If you are ill with diarrhoea you should visit your doctor who may arrange for a stool specimen from you. Diagnosis is confirmed by identifying the parasite in the laboratory from your specimen. This may take a few days.

How can I avoid Crypto?

- Always wash your hand thoroughly before eating or preparing food, after using the lavatory or changing nappies. Always use soap and hot water.
- Take care when swimming in untreated water eg: ponds and rivers. Try not to swallow the water.
- Never drink water from an unchlorinated water supply. If you suspect the water supply is contaminated make sure you boil the water before drinking. Take particular care on holiday in countries where the water supply may not be chlorinated.
- Always wash your hands after contact with domestic or farm animals. If you visit a farm or zoo make sure you use the wash hand basins provided.
- Wash or peel raw fruit and vegetables thoroughly before eating. Take particular care on holiday.
- Drink only treated milk.
- People who are particularly vulnerable to Crypto, such as the immunocompromised, should take preventative action and avoid contact with water that may be contaminated such as swimming pools, contact with farm animals and carefully wash hands after nappy changing, handling pets and after gardening or other contact with soil

What Precautions should I take if I have Crypto?

- Take particular care with your personal hygiene. Always wash your hands thoroughly with soap and hot water after going to the toilet. Make sure you use a separate towel and flannel from the rest of the family.
- Take particular care when changing the nappies of children who are ill.
- Avoid preparing and handling food for other people while you are ill.
- Do not go swimming or take your child swimming while suffering from diarrhoea or for 2 weeks after the diarrhoea has stopped. You can pass Crypto in your stools for several weeks even if you no longer have symptoms.

How long should I stay off work or school?

- Usually you can return to work or school once you are symptom free and feel well enough.
- If you are working with food or with vulnerable groups of people such as the young, elderly or those in poor health, you must tell your employer about your illness. You should not return to work unless you have been symptom free for 48 hours and your stools are back to normal.
- Young children should not attend playgroups, childminders or nursery schools until they have been symptom free for 48 hours.

For further information please contact:

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