



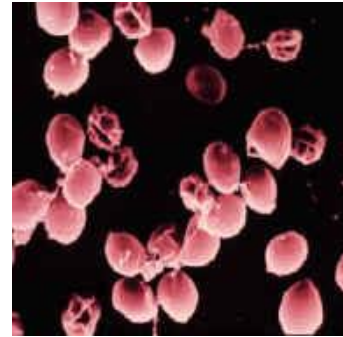
# Food safety advice

## Cryptosporidium

### The Germ

Cryptosporidium is a microscopic, single celled parasite which, if swallowed, can cause a gastro-enteritis type illness. It infects humans, animals such as cattle and sheep, rodents, birds and sometimes domestic pets, such as cats/dogs.

It has a complex life cycle and the last stage of the cycle is the production of 'oocysts'. Oocysts are the infective stage of the life cycle, and they are passed out of the body in the stools or faeces of an infected person or animal.



If these oocysts are swallowed the life cycle can then start again in the new hosts body resulting in the gastro-enteritis type illness. Cryptosporidium can only grow in a living body and cannot multiply in the environment. It can, however survive for long periods outside the body, especially in cool moist conditions.

### The Illness

In the UK infection is most common in children aged 1 to 5 years with young adults being the next most commonly affected group. Symptoms usually appear about 7 days after initial contact but the 'onset' (the time taken for the symptoms to develop) can range from 2 to 14 days. The illness normally lasts 1-3 weeks, but can occasionally last longer.

80% to 90% of people affected experience frequent, watery, offensive diarrhoea with abdominal cramps, bloating and nausea. Around 50% of cases experience vomiting (especially common in children), headaches and fever. The diarrhoea can go away and then come back again.

### Diagnosis

Diagnosis is made by the detection of the oocysts in a faecal specimen submitted to the laboratory, normally submitted by your GP. A patient found to have a Cryptosporidium infection may be contacted by an Environmental Health Officer or Control of Infection Nurse to help identify the most likely source of the infection and to offer advice to help limit further spread.

### Spread of the illness

Cryptosporidium is spread by the direct or indirect contact with the faeces of an affected animal, infection is often found around farm animals especially calves or lambs, hence an increase in infection during the spring and autumn. It can also be spread person to person usually within families, nurseries/day care centres. It is commonly spread by poor personal hygiene especially not washing hands properly after using the toilet/changing nappies. Outbreaks have also been associated with food.



# Food safety advice

Mains drinking water is very rarely a source of infection but large waterborne outbreaks have occurred where infection has been from swimming pool water. It can also survive in rivers, streams and reservoirs that have been contaminated by infected animals.

## Treatment

There is no specific treatment except to drink plenty of water to prevent dehydration and let the illness run its course. If your symptoms are severe or if you are worried contact your GP. The illness is described as 'self-limiting' however a *Cryptosporidium* infection can be a severe and serious illness for people who have a compromised immune system. You may wish to consult your GP if your symptoms last longer than a week.

## Prevention

The *Cryptosporidium* oocysts are very resistant to chlorination and disinfection. In drinking and bathing water they are controlled by continuous filtration. They can be killed by some very strong chemical solutions such as hydrogen peroxide and by drying, prolonged freezing and heat treatment such as pasteurisation.

The spread of infection can be controlled by: -

- Thorough hand washing with warm soapy water then drying thoroughly;
  - After using and cleaning the toilet.
  - After changing nappies .
  - After handling soiled laundry.
  - After handling pets or animals especially farm animals.
  - Before preparing food.
  - Before eating and drinking.
- Washing bathroom surfaces down with hot soapy water, including all door handles, light switches, and flush handles. Dry all surfaces thoroughly.
- Do not share flannels sponges and towels with an infected person.
- Do not swim in recreational water (swimming pools, hot tubs, lakes/rivers etc.) if you have cryptosporidiosis and for at least 2 weeks after your symptoms stop. You can pass *Cryptosporidium* in your stool and contaminate water for several weeks after your symptoms have ended. You do not even need to have an accident in the water. Immersion in the water may be enough for contamination to occur. This has resulted in outbreaks of cryptosporidiosis among recreational water users.



**Keep any child suffering from vomiting or diarrhoea off school, playgroup, nursery for at least 48 hours after they are completely well and do not allow them to go swimming.**