

AMEBIASIS

What is amebiasis?

Amebiasis is a gastrointestinal disease caused by a one-celled parasite called *Entamoeba histolytica*.

Who is at risk for amebiasis?

Although anyone can acquire this disease, it is most common in people who live in developing countries that have poor sanitary conditions. In the United States, amebiasis is most often found in immigrants from developing countries. It can also be found in Americans who acquired infection on travels to developing countries or who reside in institutional settings with poor sanitary conditions. Men who have sex with men can become infected, but may not necessarily develop symptoms.

How can I become infected with *E. histolytica*?

- By putting anything into your mouth that was contaminated with the stool of a person infected with *E. histolytica*.
- By swallowing something, such as water or food, that was contaminated with *E. histolytica*.
- By touching and bringing to your mouth cysts (eggs) picked up from surfaces contaminated with *E. histolytica*.

What are the symptoms of amebiasis?

On average, about one in 10 people who are infected with *E. histolytica* becomes sick from the infection. The symptoms are generally mild and can include loose stools, stomach pain, and stomach cramping. Amebic dysentery is a severe form of amebiasis associated with stomach pain, bloody stools, and fever. Rarely, *E. histolytica* invades the liver and forms an abscess. Even less commonly, it spreads to other parts of the body, such as the lungs or brain. In rare cases, it can be fatal.

If I swallowed *E. histolytica*, how quickly would I become sick?

Usually 1 to 4 weeks later.

What should I do if I think I have amebiasis?

See your health care provider.

How is amebiasis diagnosed?

Your health care provider will ask you to submit stool samples. Because *E. histolytica* is not always found in every stool sample, you will likely be asked to submit several stool samples over several days.

Diagnosis of amebiasis can be very difficult. One problem is that other parasites and other cells can look very similar to *E. histolytica* when seen under a microscope. Therefore, sometimes people may be told that they are infected with *E. histolytica* even though they may not be infected. *Entamoeba histolytica* and another amoeba, *Entamoeba dispar*, which is about 10 times more common, look the same when seen under a microscope. Unlike infection with *E. histolytica*, infection with *E. dispar* is not a problem and does not need to be treated.

If you have been told that you are infected with *E. histolytica* but you are feeling fine, you might be infected with *E. dispar*, instead. Unfortunately, most laboratories do not yet have the tests that can distinguish *E. histolytica* from *E. dispar*. Until these tests become more widely available, it might be best to assume that the parasite is *E. histolytica* and get treated accordingly.

A blood test is available. However, the test is recommended only when your health care provider thinks that your infection has invaded the wall of the intestine (gut) or some other organ of your body, such as the liver. One problem with the blood test is that it may still be positive if you had amebiasis in the past, even if you are no longer infected now.

How is amebiasis treated?

Several antibiotics are available to treat amebiasis. Treatment must be prescribed by a doctor who will likely be treated with only one antibiotic if your *E. histolytica* infection has not made you sick. You probably will be treated with two antibiotics (first one and then the other) if your infection is thought to have made you sick.

I am going to travel to a country that has poor sanitary conditions. What should I eat and drink there so I will NOT become infected with *E. histolytica* or other such germs?

- Drink only bottled or boiled (for 1 minute) water or drink carbonated (bubbly) drinks in cans or bottles. Do not drink fountain drinks or any drinks with ice cubes. Another way to make water safe is by filtering it through an "absolute 1 micron or less" filter and dissolving iodine tablets in the filtered water. "Absolute 1 micron" filters can be found in camping/outdoor supply stores.
- Do not eat fresh fruit or vegetables that you did not peel yourself.
- Do not eat or drink milk, cheese, or dairy products that may not have been pasteurized.
- Do not eat or drink anything sold by street vendors.

- Remember the adage: boil it, peel it, cook it, or forget it.

Should I be concerned about spreading infection to the rest of my household?

Yes. However, the risk of spreading infection is low if the infected person is treated with appropriate antibiotics and practices good personal hygiene. This includes thorough hand washing with soap and water after using the toilet, after changing diapers, and before handling food.