



# CRYPTOSPORIDIOSIS

## WHAT IS CRYPTOSPORIDIOSIS?

Cryptosporidiosis is a disease of the digestive, biliary or respiratory system of humans caused by a tiny, one celled, ball shaped parasite called *Cryptosporidium parvum* only visible through a very powerful microscope.

*Cryptosporidium* is an emerging micro-organism which is of medical and veterinary importance as it can infect humans and over 45 different animal species including cattle, sheep, dogs, cats, birds and fish. This organism has been found in more than 50 countries on six continents.

## SYMPTOMS OF CRYPTOSPORIDIOSIS

The following symptoms can occur between 2-10 days from the time of exposure.

- watery to severe diarrhoea
- stomach cramps
- nausea
- vomiting
- slight fever
- weight loss

Normally, symptoms last for up to two weeks. It is possible for some people to recover and then suffer the symptoms again. Not everyone who carries the parasite develops the symptoms but, unfortunately, in some cases they can pass it on to others. At the other extreme, for individuals with weakened immune systems, cryptosporidiosis can be long lasting and in some cases fatal. There is currently no cure for cryptosporidiosis, although research is continuing.

## HOW DO YOU GET IT?

You can get cryptosporidiosis by putting anything in your mouth that has been directly or indirectly contaminated with matter of faecal origin.

Examples of potential sources of *Cryptosporidium* are :

- rivers, streams, springs, ponds, lakes, swimming pools, spas and polluted ocean water
- uncooked food, fruit and vegetables
- clothing, bedding, toilets, taps, toys, nappy changing tables
- gardening
- pets, farm and stray animals (particularly young animals e.g. calves, lambs, puppies and kittens)
- sexual activities

Food handlers can contaminate cooked food with *Cryptosporidium* if they do not wash their hands after going to the toilet.

It is possible to be a carrier and spread the disease without being ill.

## HOW IS IT SPREAD?

As part of their life cycle, *Cryptosporidium* cells multiply within the gut and form oocysts (protective shell like eggs) that pass out of the body in faeces. The oocysts can survive, even in adverse environmental conditions, for a long time (two to six months in a moist environment) and are highly resistant to chemical disinfectants.

## WHO IS MOST LIKELY TO GET IT?

Children under two years of age, animal handlers, health care and childcare workers, international travellers, hikers and campers are at greatest risk. However, it is possible for outbreaks of *Cryptosporidium* infection to occur in communities, particularly if local drinking water supplies, swimming pools or food products have been contaminated by faeces containing oocysts.

## WHAT TO DO IF YOU THINK YOU HAVE IT

- See your doctor.
- Drink extra fluids to prevent dehydration.
- Take particular care to wash your hands with soap and water before preparing food and after you have been to the toilet.
- Don't enter a swimming pool or a spa until you are symptom free for at least two weeks.

## REMEMBER - TO STOP CRYPTOSPORIDIUM INFECTION

- Always wash your hands properly after going to the toilet.
- Always wash your hands before eating and preparing food.
- Supervise children to make sure they wash their hands properly.
- Don't drink untreated water.
- Wash or peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating.
- Don't enter a swimming pool or a spa if you have diarrhoea or if a member of your family has diarrhoea. Wait at least two weeks after symptoms have ceased before going to the pool or the spa.
- Avoid unnecessary touching of farm animals.
- Don't touch faeces of animals and pets without protection.
- Practise safe sex.

For travellers visiting remote areas of Australia or overseas:

- Always make sure that the drinking water is safe to drink. If you suspect the water to be contaminated or untreated, boil it for one minute before drinking. Filtered water may not be safe. Only filters that remove objects less than 1 micron will remove *Cryptosporidium*.
- Avoid raw foods washed with tap water that has not been boiled.
- Only consume freshly cooked foods and beverages, bottled water, canned food and fresh fruit and vegetables that you can peel.

## **FURTHER INFORMATION**

For further information contact your doctor

Or

your local government Environmental Health Officer

Or

Applied Environmental Health

Environmental Health Service

Health Department of Western Australia

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