

Giardia

What is Giardia?

Giardia is a flagellate protozoal parasite. The intestinal infection caused by Giardia is called Giardiasis. There are many different species of Giardia but most of these organisms are morphologically identical and thus are usually referred to as just Giardia.

On average 6.9% of dogs and cats seen by veterinarians are positive for Giardia. According to the U.S. Center for Disease Control, Giardia is the most common protozoal disease in humans. Thus Giardia is classified as zoonotic, meaning it can be transferred from animal to human.

Giardia has a direct life cycle. After cysts are ingested, usually by consuming contaminated water or food, they open. The then active stage attaches to the intestinal mucosa and absorb nutrients. Once established they continually divide, thus multiplying to extremely large numbers. Those that develop into cysts are eliminated via the feces.

Most mammals, including dogs, cats, ferrets, rabbits, primates, horses, pigs, sheep, cattle, various wildlife, and humans, can host or carry Giardia. Whether all species of Giardia can be passed from animals to humans is unclear, but there is enough evidence to determine that humans can contract Giardia from animal hosts.

Animals most likely to carry Giardia include stray animals, outdoor pets, pets in multiple animal households, puppies and kittens, and animals kept in unsanitary conditions. Animals kept in densely populated groupings such as a cattery or kennel, pet store, or animal shelter have an increased risk of contracting Giardiasis.

Indications of the Giardiasis can include chronic soft stools or diarrhea, mucoid diarrhea, and lack of weight gain. In severe cases, lethargy, dehydration, anorexia, and vomiting may occur. In very young or

debilitated animals, the dehydration resulting from the vomiting or diarrhea can be fatal.

Giardia is transmitted by ingesting the cysts. Humans become infected primarily by drinking contaminated water from streams, lakes, ponds, wells, or tap water in areas that do not have water treatment plants. Poor sanitation practices such as not using gloves or washing hands after handling potentially contaminated material are another source of infection to humans. Animals can become infected by also drinking contaminated water, but by also ingesting contaminated material caused by grooming each other, eating feces, etc. Also since cysts can live in cold and wet environments for several months, humans can unknowingly introduce Giardia into their homes and to their pets on shoes, feet etc.

As Giardia cysts are shed in feces, diagnosis can be made by routine fecal smears done by your local veterinarian. Since presence can be inconsistent, multiple tests should be run with fecal samples collected from different days. Once diagnosed, your veterinarian will prescribe proper treatment. By following your veterinarians directions, Giardia can be controlled and eliminated.