

# Shigella - Shigellosis



## What is *Shigella*?

*Shigella* is a germ that causes a disease called shigellosis. Children younger than 5 years are most likely to get shigellosis, but people from all age groups can get this disease. Most people with shigellosis will get better within 5 to 7 days without medical treatment. However, *Shigella* bacteria can cause more severe illness in infants, the elderly, or people with immune systems weakened by cancer, cancer treatments, or other serious conditions (like diabetes, kidney failure, liver disease, and HIV/AIDS).

## What are the Symptoms of *Shigella* Infection?

People who are sick with *Shigella* usually start experiencing symptoms 1 to 2 days after putting something in their mouth or swallowing something that has come into contact with the bacteria. Symptoms of shigellosis may include:

- Diarrhea (sometimes bloody)
- Stomach pain
- Fever
- Feeling the need to pass stool [poop] even when the bowels are empty

## How do People Get Sick from *Shigella* Bacteria?

People usually get sick from *Shigella* bacteria after putting something in their mouth or swallowing something that has come into contact with the stool of someone else who is sick with shigellosis. Just a small amount of *Shigella* germs can make someone sick.

People can get sick by:

- Getting *Shigella* germs on their hands, which may happen after:
  - Changing diapers of children who are infected with the germ
  - Touching people who are sick who might have the germ on their hands or bodies
- Eating food that was prepared by someone who is sick with the germ
- Swallowing recreational water (for example, lake or river water) while swimming or drinking water that was contaminated with stool (poop) containing the germ
- Having exposure to stool during sexual contact with someone who is sick



There are four main types (species) of *Shigella* bacteria. *Shigella sonnei* is the most common type in the United States, followed by *Shigella flexneri*. *Shigella dysenteriae* and *Shigella boydii* are rare in the United States, though they continue to be important causes of sickness in underdeveloped countries. People who have been infected with a specific type of *Shigella* are not likely to get infected with that specific type again for at least several years. However, they can still get infected with other types of *Shigella*.

## How Can I Avoid Getting Sick from *Shigella* Bacteria?



*Shigella* germs can spread very easily from person to person, so the best thing to do to keep from getting sick is to wash your hands with soap and water—especially after using the bathroom, after changing a child’s diapers, and before preparing food and eating.

If soap and water are not available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol (check the product label to be sure). Hand sanitizer with at least 60% alcohol is effective in killing *Shigella* germs. But use soap and water as soon as possible afterwards because hand sanitizer does not kill all types of germs and may not work as well if hands are visibly greasy or dirty.

## What Should I Do If I Think I Am Sick with *Shigella* Bacteria?

If you have symptoms of shigellosis, it is important to drink fluids to stay hydrated and to wash hands often with soap and water to keep from spreading the germs to others. Contact your healthcare provider if you or one of your family members have a fever, bloody diarrhea, severe stomach pain, are dehydrated, or feel very sick. Your doctor may order a test that will show whether you are sick from *Shigella* bacteria.

It is important to stay home from childcare and school while sick because *Shigella* germs spread easily from one person to another. If your doctor diagnoses you or your family member with shigellosis, your local health department may have a policy on when to return to childcare or school. Refer to your local health department website for more information.

## How Can *Shigella* Infections Be Diagnosed?

Many kinds of germs can cause diarrhea. Knowing which germ is causing an illness is important to help guide appropriate treatment. Healthcare providers can order laboratory tests to identify *Shigella* germs in the stool of an infected person.



## How Can *Shigella* Infections Be Treated?

People who have shigellosis usually get better without antibiotic treatment in 5 to 7 days. People with mild shigellosis may need only fluids and rest. Bismuth subsalicylate (for example, Pepto-Bismol) may be helpful, but people sick with shigellosis should not use medications that slow down the way our body digests food, such as loperamide (for example, Imodium) or diphenoxylate with atropine (for example, Lomotil).

Healthcare providers may prescribe antibiotics to people with severe cases of shigellosis to help them get better faster. However, some antibiotics are not effective against certain types of *Shigella*. Healthcare providers can order laboratory tests to determine which antibiotics are likely to work. Tell your healthcare provider if you do not get better within a couple of days after starting antibiotics. They can do more tests to learn whether your type of *Shigella* bacteria can be treated effectively with the antibiotic you are taking. If not, your doctor may prescribe another antibiotic.