

DIARRHEAL ILLNESS FACT SHEET

What is diarrhea?

Diarrhea is the passing of loose, watery stool and is a symptom of infection by many different bacteria, viruses and parasites. Diarrhea can also have non-infectious causes.

What causes diarrhea?

Infectious diarrhea, or diarrhea caused by a germ, may be caused by bacteria, viruses and parasites. Some of the most common causes are:

- Bacteria: Salmonella, Shigella, Campylobacter, E. coli O157:H7
- Viruses: Norovirus (Norwalk-like), Rotavirus, Enterovirus
- Parasites: Giardia, Cryptosporidium, Cyclospora

What are the symptoms of diarrhea?

The characteristics of diarrhea vary, but can include: loose stool, watery stool, or stool containing blood or mucus. Diarrhea can either be acute or persistent (lasting 14 days or longer). Symptoms often associated with diarrhea are nausea, vomiting, stomach cramping and fever. The main danger associated with diarrhea is dehydration.

What are the symptoms of dehydration?

The symptoms of serious dehydration include lethargy, sunken eyes, very dry mouth, drinking poorly or not at all, and a very slow skin pinch. Dehydration is a serious concern and if suspected, contact a health care professional immediately.

Can children go to school while they have diarrhea?

NO. Children and adults should not go to school until at least 24 hours after the diarrhea has stopped. In the case of norovirus infection, wait at least 48 hours until returning to school.

How is diarrhea spread?

In most cases, diarrhea-causing germs are spread through contamination by infected feces. Small amounts of infected feces may be on individuals' hands (especially if they do not wash their hands thoroughly) and spread to others directly. The feces may also contaminate objects, food or water. When people put their hands in their mouth or consume infected food or water, they may become infected with the diarrhea-causing germ.

How can the spread of diarrhea be prevented?

- Wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water after using the toilet and changing diapers and before preparing or eating food. Staff should closely monitor handwashing of all children after children have used the bathroom or have been diapered.
- Clean and disinfect diapering area and potty chairs after each use, and bathroom toilets, sinks, and toys at least daily and when soiled.
- Clean and sanitize mouthed toys, objects and surfaces at least daily, and when soiled.

For more information please contact Contra Costa Public Health at 925-313-6740 and visit our website at <http://cchealth.org/cd/>