

# Gloucester City Council

## *Factsheet*

### **CRYPTOSPORIDIUM**

#### **What is Cryptosporidium?**

Cryptosporidium is a parasite which, if swallowed, can cause gastroenteritis. Most of the infections in man and livestock are with just one species, *Cryptosporidium parvum*.

Cryptosporidium can grow only in a living host and does not multiply in the environment. The parasite develops mainly in the cells lining the gut where it goes through a complex life cycle. The last stage of this cycle is the production of oocysts, the infective stage. These are passed out of the body in the stools and can survive in the environment, especially in cool moist conditions.

#### **What symptoms does Cryptosporidium cause?**

The infection is most common in children aged 1-5 years; younger adults are the next most commonly affected group. Infection is less common in infants under 6 months of age or adults over 45 years.

The incubation period ranges from 1 to 28 days, the average is 7 to 10 days. Symptoms may start with the loss of appetite, nausea and abdominal pain. This is usually followed by profuse, foul smelling, watery diarrhoea, vomiting (especially in children), and there may be mild fever and noticeable weight loss. In otherwise healthy people the symptoms usually persist for 1 to 3 weeks but some symptoms can recur for longer periods (usually not more than a month).

#### **How is Cryptosporidium spread?**

The infection may be passed either directly from an animal or from person to person. It may also be passed indirectly through the environment, especially in water; unpasteurised milk, offal and occasionally undercooked meat such as sausages. Further transmission may then result in secondary cases, for example in families or play groups. This is especially so between children who are not toilet trained or adults caring for them. The risk of this happening is lessened through careful attention to personal hygiene and care with food handling and preparation. Symptomatic infection is uncommon among rural adults who are regularly exposed to livestock, and therefore maintain high levels of immunity. Visitors (on holiday or to open farms), are less likely to have immunity and may become infected by contact with bottle fed lambs or calves, or by hands soiled from the farm environment.



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## ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH

Gloucester City Council    Tel 01452 396396    Fax 01452 396340  
Herbert Warehouse    Email [enviro@gloucester.gov.uk](mailto:enviro@gloucester.gov.uk)  
The Docks    Minicom 01452 396161  
Gloucester GL1 2EQ    [www.gloucester.gov.uk](http://www.gloucester.gov.uk)



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## **How can we prevent Cryptosporidium?**

Oocysts are highly resistant to most disinfectants including bleach. They are killed by some strong chemical solutions such as hydrogen peroxide, ammonia, or caustic soda, and by desiccation, prolonged freezing and moderate heat (as in pasteurisation).

Despite the resistance of the oocysts to disinfectants, the risk of passing on the infection can be considerably reduced by good personal and domestic hygiene. This includes thorough washing of hands followed by complete drying (especially if you are preparing food which will not be cooked). Contaminated surfaces should be washed down with a soapy disinfectant solution followed by allowing the surface to dry thoroughly.

It is important for farm visitors to warn children not to eat sweets or suck their fingers. Visitors should wash their hands before eating food and again when they leave. Remember that footwear may re-contaminate hands when boots are removed back at the car or at home.

### **Summary:**

#### **Common Causes:**

- Water courses/tap water
- Unpasteurised milk
- Offal
- Uncooked meats such as sausages
- Poor toilet training in children
- Contact with animals such as farm visits or contact with lambs or calves

The infection may be passed directly from an animal or from person to person or indirectly through the environment.

#### **Prevention of Cryptosporidium:**

- Good personal practices, i.e. hand washing and complete drying
- Good domestic hygiene, i.e. washing contaminated surfaces down with soapy disinfectant solution and allowing the surface to dry thoroughly

#### **Return to work/school**

Current Department of Health advice is that patients should remain off work/school until 48 hours after symptoms have ceased.