



Giardia

What is Giardia?

Giardia is an intestinal parasite that affects dogs, particularly puppies, but can occur in cats. Diarrhea, severe or mild, is the most common sign of giardia. The diarrhea can be either intermittent or chronic. Typically there is a high volume of diarrhea with soft, almost frothy, mucousy stools. Some pets show no symptoms. Weight loss and malabsorption can occur. A rancid odor to the feces is often noticed. Usually the diarrhea goes away on its own and the pet is fine, but some severe cases can cause weight loss and general lethargy.

Most pets don't become seriously ill because of Giardia, so the prognosis is almost always good. However, if a pet has some underlying disease, particularly one that compromises the immune system, giardiasis can cause a more serious infection.

Not all patients with *Giardia* actually have diarrhea but because *Giardia* is the most common intestinal parasite affecting humans in North America, treatment is generally recommended for the pet testing positive even if no symptoms are being shown. ***The idea is to reduce human exposure.***

Where does Giardia come from?

In North America, it's fairly common in people too. It's not so much that it is passed directly from animals to humans, but that both come into contact with the same contaminated water source, such as water from a well. ***Many dogs pick it up from puddles*** at the dog park. Infection is more common in kennel situations where animals are housed in groups.

How is Giardia detected?

The infection is diagnosed with a microscopic fecal examination or a Giardia-specific ELISA test.

How is Giardia treated?

There are several different Drugs used to eliminate the parasite including metronidazole, furazolidone, quinacrine, albendazole, Drontal, and fenbendazole. The choice of drug, the dose, and the length of treatment, will depend on the severity of the infection, the reproductive status of the animal, etc.

Because cysts can stick to the fur of the infected patient and be a source for re-infection, the positive ***animal should receive a bath at least once in the course of treatment.***

Some strains of Giardia are resistant to certain treatments. A stool sample should be checked after treatment.

A *Giardia* vaccine is on the market but it is not intended to prevent infection in the vaccinated animal. Instead the vaccine is licensed as an adjunct to treatment and is used to reduce the shedding of cysts by the vaccinated patient. This would be helpful in a kennel situation that is trying to reduce environmental contamination during an outbreak or where an animal keeps getting reinfected, but it is not helpful to the average dog whose owner wants to simply prevent infection. The 2006 American Animal Hospital Association Guidelines list this vaccine as “not recommended.”

Environmental Decontamination; The most readily available effective disinfectant is probably bleach diluted 1:32 in water, which in one study required less than one minute of contact to kill *Giardia* cysts. Organic matter such as dirt or stool is protective to the cyst, so on a concrete surface basic cleaning should be effected prior to disinfection. Animals should be thoroughly bathed before being reintroduced into a “clean” area. A properly chlorinated swimming pool should not be able to become contaminated. As for areas with lawn or plants, decontamination will not be possible without killing the plants and allowing the area to dry out in direct sunlight.

Good hygiene, such as washing one's hands after handling the infected pet or its waste, and prompt disposal of feces, is especially important in this situation.

Can People or other Pets Become Infected?

Yes, as outlined above, this parasite can be passed to people and other pets.

How do we know the infection has been eliminated?

A follow-up stool test is performed usually a month after treatment, but it is advisable to have another sample tested 6 months later and annually at a minimum