



GIARDIASIS

What is Giardia?

Giardia is sometimes confused with “worms” because they invade the gastrointestinal tract and can cause diarrhea. *Giardia* is a one-celled parasite classified as *protozoa*.

Most cats or dogs that are infected with *Giardia* do not have diarrhea or any other signs of illness. When the eggs (cysts) are found in the stool of a dog without diarrhea, they are generally considered a transient, insignificant finding. However, in puppies, kittens and debilitated adults, they may cause severe, watery diarrhea that may be fatal.

How did my pet get Giardia?

Your pet becomes infected with *Giardia* when it swallows the cyst stage of the parasite. Once inside the intestine, the cyst goes through several stages of maturation. Eventually, infective cysts are passed in the stool. These cysts lie in the environment and can infect other animals. *Giardia* may also be transmitted through drinking infected water.

How is giardiasis diagnosed?

Giardiasis or infection with *Giardia* is diagnosed by performing a microscopic examination of a stool sample. The cysts are quite small and usually require a special floatation medium for detection, so they are not normally found on routine fecal examinations. Occasionally, the parasites may be seen on a direct smear of the feces. A blood test is also available for detection of antigens (cell proteins) of *Giardia* in the blood. This test is more accurate than the stool exam, but it may require several days to get a result from the laboratory.

How is giardiasis treated?

The typical drug used to kill *Giardia* is metronidazole, an antibiotic. It is normally given for 5-7 days to treat giardiasis. Other drugs are also used if diarrhea and dehydration occur. If metronidazole is not effective, other medications may be recommended.

Can humans become infected with Giardia?

Giardia can also cause diarrhea in humans. Therefore, environmental disinfection is important. The use of diluted chlorine bleach at 1:32 or 1:16 dilutions (one cup in a gallon or 500 ml in 4 liters of water) is effective in killing the cysts. *Giardia* cysts are very susceptible to drying. We recommend thoroughly cleaning the pet’s areas and then allowing it to dry for several days before reintroducing pets.

