

This stomach parasite is spreading. Here's how to protect yourself.

Symptoms can last from a few days to several months



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There is a nationwide spike in cyclosporiasis, a parasitic intestinal illness characterized by frequent, sometimes explosive, diarrhea.

But how does one know if it's the parasite or just bad diarrhea? Turns out, it's hard for health officials to know.

At least [32 Marylanders](#) this year have come down with cyclosporiasis, according to the Maryland Department of Health. According to the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#), roughly 843 people nationwide have gotten sick with the illness, with no deaths reported.

"There's no particular threshold that's being used, but there are certainly, without a doubt, a higher number of reported and suspected cases of this disease in numerous geographic areas," said infectious disease expert Greg Schrank.

Schrank is an associate hospital epidemiologist at the University of Maryland Medical Center and an associate professor of medicine at the University of Maryland School of Medicine. He spends his days studying and treating infectious diseases.

Cyclosporiasis symptoms can last from a few days to several months. Infected people can show no symptoms. The most common symptom is watery diarrhea. Less common symptoms include extreme fatigue, loss of appetite, weight loss, increased gas, stomach cramps, nausea and low-grade fever.

Most people's immune systems can fight off the disease without treatment, and those cases never get reported, Schrank said.

It is difficult to confirm whether someone has cyclosporiasis, Schrank explained. Doctors usually diagnose it by testing a stool sample in a laboratory, most often using a PCR test that looks for the parasite's genetic material, but many medical centers will not or cannot do those tests.

"If you were to go to a neighborhood urgent care and your symptoms are relatively mild, even though you're going and seeking care, it might not be part of their routine evaluation to test for some of these things," Schrank said. "It's very safe to say that there are more cases that have occurred than are present in the numbers that are being reported by the CDC."

There are 31 states currently reporting to the CDC, so it's unclear how many cases there are in the other 19 states.

So far this year, Schrank has yet to treat a patient with cyclosporiasis because he works with inpatients, and cyclosporiasis rarely leads to hospitalization. The CDC has recorded 86 hospitalizations so far this year.

Young people, older people and immunocompromised people are most at risk for a severe case of cyclosporiasis. The symptoms can lead to severe, sometimes dangerous, dehydration, which is particularly dangerous in a heat wave like the [one that just passed](#). In severe cases, antibiotics might be necessary.

To avoid contracting the illness in the first place, the CDC recommends washing hands thoroughly and frequently and washing fruits and vegetables thoroughly before eating. Some fruits are harder to wash than others, such as berries that are easily crushed.

To be even more confident, Schrank suggests cooking produce and being extra cautious with delicate items like raspberries, which can be tricky to wash.

According to their website, the CDC is working with state health departments to investigate the source of the outbreak.

"Most often in these clusters or outbreaks, it's something in the food chain that can be identified as a potential commonality," Schrank said. "Allowing that investigation to occur so that the source can be identified and then hopefully addressed, that's when we see a reduction in the number of new cases."

Have a news tip? Contact Bridget Byrne at bbyrne@baltsun.com.