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Giardia and Giardiasis

Giardiasis is the intestinal disease caused by the parasite *Giardia canis*. Giardiasis usually affects dogs, particularly puppies, but can occur in cats. 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.

The majority of the parasite's life cycle is spent in the intestines of its unwitting host. The parasite forms a hard cyst that gets passed in feces and is thus spread into the environment.

Diarrhea, severe or mild, is most common sign of giardiasis. The diarrhea can be either intermittent or chronic. Typically, there is a high volume of diarrhea with soft, almost frothy, mucousy stools. 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. The infection is diagnosed with a fecal examination or a *Giardia*-specific ELISA test that is available at Cornell University. A positive test, in the absence of clinical signs, doesn't mean that the pet requires treatment because *Giardia* is a common inhabitant of the intestinal tract. But a positive test in a pet with clinical signs can mean that giardiasis is likely involved, so treatment should be undertaken.

Medications commonly used to eliminate the parasite include metronidazole, furazolidone, quinacrine, albendazole, 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, veterinarian preference, etc.

If the pet is severely dehydrated from the diarrhea, fluid therapy may be necessary.

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. However, even these animals typically recover with slightly more intensive treatment.