



Shigellosis Backgrounder

Shigellosis is an infectious disease caused by a group of bacteria called *Shigella*. The genus *Shigella* is distributed worldwide and is the typical cause of inflammatory dysentery, often responsible for 5 to 10% of diarrheal illness in many areas. Most who are infected with *Shigella* develop diarrhea, fever and stomach cramps starting a day or two after they are exposed to the bacteria. The diarrhea is often bloody. Shigellosis usually resolves in 5 to 7 days. In some persons, especially young children and the elderly, the diarrhea can be so severe that the patient needs to be hospitalized. A severe infection with high fever may also be associated with seizures in children less than 2 years old. Some persons who are infected may have no symptoms at all, but may still pass the *Shigella* bacteria to others.

The bacteria that cause *Shigella* are microscopic living creatures that pass from person-to-person. *Shigella* bacteria were discovered over 100 years ago by a Japanese scientist named Shiga, for whom they are named. There are several different kinds of *Shigella* bacteria: *Shigella sonnei*, also known as "Group D" *Shigella*, accounts for over two-thirds of the shigellosis in the United States. A second type, *Shigella flexneri*, or "group B" *Shigella*, accounts for almost all of the rest. Other types of *Shigella* are rare in this country, though they continue to be important causes of disease in the developing world. One type found in the developing world, *Shigella dysenteriae* type 1, causes deadly epidemics there.

Every year about 18,000 cases of shigellosis are reported in the United States. Because many milder cases are not diagnosed or reported, the actual number of infections may be twenty times greater. Shigellosis is particularly common and causes recurrent problems in settings where hygiene is poor. Shigellosis can sometimes sweep through entire communities. Shigellosis is more common in summer than winter. Children, especially toddlers aged 2 to 4, are the most likely to get shigellosis. Many cases are related to the spread of illness in child-care settings and many more are the result of the spread of the illness in families with small children.