

# Patient information from BMJ

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## Amoebic dysentery

**Amoebic dysentery, or amoebiasis, is an infection in your intestines (bowels) caused by a type of organism called an amoeba.**

**We've brought together the research about amoebic dysentery and weighed up the evidence about how to treat it. You can use our information to talk to your doctor and decide which treatments are best for you.**

### What is it?

Amoebic dysentery is caused by a type of parasite called an amoeba. People usually catch it by eating contaminated food or drinking contaminated water.

The parasites then get into your body and live in your bowels, which can cause bad diarrhoea. If not treated this can cause serious illness and, on rare occasions, death.

Amoebic dysentery is more common in countries where people don't have clean running water or may have difficulty keeping kitchens and toilets clean. You're most likely to get it if you've been travelling in a developing country.

Amoebic dysentery can also be passed from person to person. For example, if someone doesn't wash their hands after going to the toilet and then shakes your hand or hands you something, amoebas could pass onto your hand and then into your mouth when you eat.

Even if the infection in your bowels doesn't make you ill, you can still pass it on to other people. So it's important to get treatment.

Apart from picking up amoebic dysentery while travelling in developing countries, you might also catch it:

- if you live in crowded conditions
- if you have a weak immune system (for example, because you're having chemotherapy or you have HIV)
- through oral or anal sex.

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## What are the symptoms?

The main symptom of amoebic dysentery is diarrhoea. This means you get loose stools and you need to go to the toilet more often than usual.

You may also get:

- diarrhoea with blood or mucus in it
- bleeding from your rectum
- pain in your abdomen
- pain when going to the toilet to pass stools
- fever.

You may also lose your appetite and lose weight.

Diarrhoea can make your body lose too much water. This is called being dehydrated. You need to make sure you drink plenty of water if you have diarrhoea.

If you become so dehydrated that you need to go to hospital, you may be given drinks called rehydration solutions. People who are so ill that they can't drink liquids can be given fluids by intravenous (IV) drip.

## What treatments work?

It's important to see your doctor if you think you may have amoebic dysentery because, even though the diarrhoea may go away after a few weeks, without treatment you'll still have the parasites in your body.

This means that you could still pass on the infection to other people, and that the diarrhoea could come back.

The treatment for amoebic dysentery is antibiotics. Antibiotics are usually used to kill germs called bacteria but they also kill amoeba parasites.

You'll need a prescription from a doctor for these drugs. You usually take them as tablets, but some are also available as a drip (also called an IV or intravenous infusion).

You may be given drugs by a drip if you're vomiting a lot and you can't swallow tablets. If you take tablets you will usually need to take them for between five and ten days.

After you've finished taking antibiotics, you'll probably be given another type of drug that helps to clear the infection from your intestines. You usually need to take this for 10 days.

These medicines for amoebic dysentery can have side effects in some people, but they are usually mild. They include:

- nausea and vomiting
- pain in your abdomen, and diarrhoea
- a bitter metallic taste in your mouth or a tongue that looks coated (furry)
- weakness or dizziness

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- dark-coloured urine
- pain while urinating
- loss of appetite
- rash
- trouble sleeping
- blurred vision or headaches.

### What will happen to me?

If you become ill with diarrhoea after you've been travelling it's important to tell your doctor about where you travelled to. This will help your doctor to give you the right treatment.

Your doctor might take a sample of your stool so it can be tested for amoebas. You might also have a blood test.

Your doctor will also examine your abdomen. This is because, rarely, the infection can break through the wall of your bowels and affect other parts of your body such as your liver. This can cause swelling in your abdomen.

If your doctor thinks the amoebas have spread to your liver, you may need more tests and treatment.

Sometimes the amoebas can cause a more serious condition called **fulminant colitis**. Fulminant colitis is rare but it causes severe inflammation (swelling) of the bowel, and it can be life threatening. The symptoms include:

- pain all over your abdomen
- very bad diarrhoea
- fever.

It's important that you see a doctor as soon as possible if you get any of these symptoms.

Your doctor may give you advice on how to avoid passing on the infection to the people you live or work with.

Make sure you wash your hands after going to the toilet and before preparing food. If you work with food, or if you're a healthcare worker, you should stay off work until your doctor says it's safe for you to return.

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