

## Communicable Diseases Factsheet

*Blastocystis hominis* is a species of one of the most common human intestinal organisms. Many people with *Blastocystis hominis* in their stools have no symptoms. The organism is most likely transmitted via the faecal-oral route. Good hygiene practices should be used to help prevent infection.

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### What is *Blastocystis hominis*?

*Blastocystis hominis* is a species of one of the most common human intestinal organisms. *Blastocystis* species are found in people throughout the world and higher numbers are reported in developing countries. *Blastocystis* has also been found in a wide range of animals including mammals, birds and amphibians.

There is still debate about whether *Blastocystis* species really causes disease in humans, as the organism can be found in both well and unwell individuals. New research suggests that some types of *Blastocystis* may be more likely to be associated with symptoms.

### What are the symptoms?

Many people with *Blastocystis hominis* in their stools have no symptoms at all. However, in those that do report symptoms, the most common ones are diarrhoea, abdominal pain and vomiting. Other reported symptoms are anal itching, weight loss, constipation and excess gas. However, such symptoms may be caused by other conditions, even if *Blastocystis* is found in the stools.

### How is it spread?

It's not certain how *Blastocystis* is spread. Given that the organism is found in the gastrointestinal tract, transmission is most likely to occur via the faecal-oral route. This means that infection might occur if you bring something to your mouth that has touched the faeces of a person infected with *Blastocystis* or if you swallow food or water contaminated with the organism.

### Who is at risk?

*Blastocystis* is found in the intestines of many people, some without ever having symptoms.

Some studies have shown that people with poor immune systems have higher rates of identification of *Blastocystis* in their stools. People who travel to areas of poor sanitary condition are also more likely to have *Blastocystis* identified.

### How is it prevented?

As *Blastocystis* seem to be more common in places with poor sanitation, it is important to practice good hand hygiene, especially after using the toilet and before handling food. Some general precautionary measures that should be taken are:

- Wash hands thoroughly using soap for at least 10 seconds and dry them with a clean towel after using the toilet, before preparing food and after handling nappies.
- Avoid food or water that may be contaminated by sewage
- Wash and peel all raw vegetables and fruits before eating
- When traveling in countries where the water supply may be unsafe, avoid drinking unboiled tap water.

### How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis is based on symptoms and on finding the *Blastocystis* organism from a stool sample. It is also important to exclude other causes of a patient's symptoms.

### How is it treated?

Due to the uncertainty of whether this organism is a pathogen or not, it is difficult for doctors to decide whether to treat the infection.

There are medications available to treat *Blastocystis* infections. However, these are not always effective in relieving symptoms and it may be necessary for the doctor to look for other possible causes of a patient's symptoms.

### What is the public health response?

*Blastocystis hominis* is not a notifiable condition in New South Wales and there is no public health response required for individual infections.

For further information please call your local Public Health Unit on 1300 066 055