



Shigella species (*Shigella* spp.)

What is it?

- Shigellosis is an infection of the digestive system caused by Shigella bacteria. The bacteria are only found in humans. Anyone can be infected but children are particularly prone. The bacteria cannot survive for long outside the human body.
- Dysentery is caused by infection with one particular Shigella species (*Shigella dysenteriae*).

Where is it found?

The Shigella bacteria are found in the faeces of infected persons. The disease is often spread via the faecal-oral route by:

- Direct contact with an infected person.
- Eating foods contaminated by infected food handlers.
- Eating vegetables grown in fields containing sewage.
- Eating food contaminated by flies carrying the infection.
- Drinking or swimming in contaminated water.
- Cases of shigellosis are usually sporadic, however, outbreaks have been known to occur in areas with severe crowding and/or poor hygiene.

Why is it a problem?

- The initial manifestations of acute shigellosis are usually fever, malaise, abdominal pain and watery diarrhoea, although some people may show no symptoms at all. The disease generally lasts for five to seven days.

- Haematologic manifestations occur primarily in subjects with *S. dysenteriae*.
- Rare patients may exhibit metastatic infection of skin, wounds, the lungs, the joints, the urinary tract, or the meninges.
- *S. flexneri* infection can progress to Reiter's syndrome (iritis, urethritis, arthritis) which can last for months or years and can lead to chronic arthritis.

Who is at risk?

- Children aged two to four are the most likely to get shigellosis, especially those who attend day-care centres.
- Other groups who may be at greater risk of infection include child-care workers, overseas travellers, institutionalised people and active homosexual men.

How can the risk be reduced?

Simple hygiene measures can be used to effectively control and prevent shigellosis. These primarily include:

- Hand washing after using the toilet and before preparing food,
- Sanitary disposal of nappies, and
- Protecting food and water from potential contamination.