

## **Let's Talk About.....Shigella**

### **What is "Shigella"?**

Shigella is the name of the bacteria that causes "Shigellosis".

### **Then what is "Shigellosis"?**

Shigellosis is an illness that can cause fever, nausea, vomiting, stomach cramps and diarrhea. There is often blood and mucous in the bowel movement.

### **So what is so bad about a little diarrhea?**

Some people have just a day or two of "a stomach flu" and then feel better. A few people have the bacteria and have no symptoms. But very young children can have more severe problems, like dehydration and convulsions. Elderly people in poor health and anyone who is immune compromised can also have a more severe illness.

### **Can you die from it?**

Probably not, but you can get pretty sick.

### **Can it be cured?**

It is usually treated with 5—10 days of antibiotics, but it will go away eventually even without antibiotics. Taking the antibiotics will make the symptoms go away faster. This is what's meant by a "self-limiting" illness.

### **How do you get this nasty stuff?**

The germs are found in the bowel movement of an infected person. And it doesn't take many germs to cause symptoms. In order to cause symptoms, those germs have to find their way into the mouth and then the stomach. This is called the "fecal-oral route". Sometimes food and water are contaminated with Shigella. And sometimes it is found on things like bathroom surfaces. It is not spread through the air or by touching or kissing someone. You actually have to get those germs in the mouth and to your stomach before it causes problems.

### **Ew-ww-ww-w! Gross! How does that happen?**

Let's say the person who has Shigella in their system is an adult and his name is Fred. Fred goes to the bathroom, has a bowel movement and doesn't wash his hands or doesn't wash his hands well. Then let's say that Fred makes you a sandwich or a salad. You eat it along with a few of the Fred's Shigella germs and now you have Shigellosis. Or let's say that Fred doesn't wash his hands correctly and he leaves the germs on the bathroom faucet. Then let's say that your child uses the same bathroom, touches the same faucet handles that Fred left the Shigella germ on, and your child decides to bite his fingernails. Guess who has Shigellosis now?

### **You said something about washing hands "correctly"?**

Believe it or not, there is a right way and a not-so-right way to wash hands. The right way is to use paper towels and make them easy to reach after you wash hands. Turn on the water, use soap (bacterial soap is not necessary), and wash thoroughly while you sing the alphabet song, or Yankee Doodle. I personally sing "Happy Birthday". When finished with your song (or about

20 seconds), dry your hands with the paper towel. Then **using the paper towel**, turn the water off. Touching the faucets with clean hands will only recontaminate your hands. You might want to use that paper towel to open the doors to leave the restroom.

### **I thought only kids in day care got Shigella?**

Nope. Remember Fred and his salad? Anyone can get Shigella and anyone can spread it. It spreads more easily in children, particularly children in diapers because their hands are everywhere, including their diapers. They can easily pass it around the cleanest of child care centers.

### **How do you know if you have Shigella?**

The only way to tell for sure is to have a test done on a small sample of stool, or bowel movement. It generally takes 3 or more days to get the results of this test.

### **So what is the Health Department doing about this Shigella problem?**

We've done a lot of educational things to teach people the importance of thorough hand washing. The child day cares have been targeted to receive most of our attention because the most of the cases of Shigella have been in children in day care. All 900+ centers received a free video developed by the Health Department explaining correct handwashing and sanitizing procedures. A food and facilities sanitarian and a child care nurse visit each center where there is a case of Shigella and makes sure they are following all the rules regarding sanitizing. All of the day cares in those zip codes that have the most cases will have an on-site educational visit from a Health Department official.

### **Is there anything else that I need to know?**

Wash your hands—after going to the bathroom and before handling or eating food. And make sure your children wash their hands. If your child is ill, don't send him to day care. All child care centers have been told to send children home who are ill, particularly children with diarrhea. Also, talk with your doctor about having a test done for Shigella if you or your child has been ill with diarrhea for several days, particularly if several people in your family or close contacts have been ill with the same symptoms. And did I mention **Wash Your Hands!**