

WHAT DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT AMOEBAS?

By: Suzanne Tejada

IF YOU THINK **amoebas** are just those single-celled parasites that you viewed under a microscope in ninth grade, think again: they are so much more. Unfortunately, living in Mexico one's relationship with these pesky parasites can become up close and personal fast. Not to scare you or anything, but as any of you who are acquainted with amoebas know, this is not a simple case of the flu. The infection wrecks havoc on your large intestine and can linger around for months if not properly treated. They are sneaky little buggers; just when you think you have them beaten, they hit you when you least expect them. The symptoms (lower abdomen pain, dysentery, and sometimes fever) may not have you bedridden, but they will leave you running to the bathroom from two to ten times daily. Here are the facts:

What Is It?

- Gastrointestinal amebiasis is an infection of the large intestine



caused by microscopic one-celled parasites classified as *Entamoeba histolytica*, but more commonly known as amoebas.

- These parasites can be found where there has been contamination in the water supply.
- About 10 percent of the world's population is infected with amoebas.

Symptoms

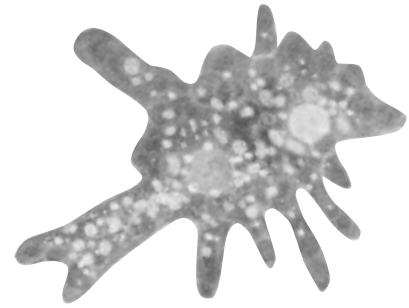
- In about 90% of cases, the infecting strain of amoeba is non-invasive and produces no symptoms. Symptoms usually begin two to six weeks after amoebas first enter the body. In some people symptoms are mild, consisting of mild pain and gurgling sounds in the lower abdomen, with two or three loose stools daily.
- Or there can be full-blown symptoms of amoebic dysentery, including high fever, severe abdominal pain, and 10 or more episodes of diarrhea daily.
- Diarrhea may be bloodstained or filled with mucus.

Prevention

- There is no vaccine for amebiasis.
- Wherever there is a chance that amoebas may contaminate drinking water, boil water for at least five minutes.
- Peel the skins of fruits and vegetables. Use chlorine drops to disinfect fruits or vegetables without skin that will be eaten raw.
- Wash hands frequently especially before eating and after using the toilet.

Treatment

- Call a doctor whenever you have unexplained persistent diarrhea or severe abdominal pain.



Entamoeba histolytica

- Gastrointestinal amebiasis is treated with nitroimidazole drugs, which kill amoebas in the blood, in the wall of the intestine and in liver abscesses. These drugs include metronidazole (Flagyl) in the United States and tinidazole or ornidazole in other countries.

We've all heard about Moctezuma's revenge, yet we know little about its more dangerous cousin, the **amoeba**. Coming to Mexico presents many challenges, and this is just one more obstacle to overcome. But cheer up! There is an upside: after living in Mexico a while, your body builds up immunity to contaminated water making you a less likely target. Soon you will be warning visiting relatives not to eat salad while you munch away contentedly. While visitors eye the metal bins of "aguas" suspiciously, you happily slurp away. Once a taco stand skeptic, you are now first in line on a Sunday morning. Being a veteran has its pay offs.

Information for this article was found at www.intelihealth.com

Additional Information

National Center for Infectious Diseases
Toll-Free (800) 311-3435 or (001-880) is the prefix from Mexico
<http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/>