CRYPTOSPORIDIUM

WHAT IS CRYPTOSPORIDIUM?
Cryptosporidium, or “crypto” for short, is a single-celled parasite, too small to be seen with the naked eye. It is found in human and animal feces. People living with HIV, especially those with T cell counts below 200, should be especially careful to avoid crypto.

HOW IS CRYPTO SPREAD?
Cryptosporidium is transmitted through oral-fecal contact. For example, crypto can be spread by:
- eating food or drinking water that is contaminated with infected feces (including water in swimming pools)
- touching your mouth without washing your hands after handling feces or objects contaminated with feces
- by oral-anal contact (rimming)

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF CRYPTO?
Cryptosporidium causes a flu-like illness. The major symptoms start between 2 to 10 days after infection and may include: watery, chronic diarrhea and stomach cramps. These symptoms might get worse after you eat. Headaches, vomiting, low-grade fever, loss of appetite, weight loss, and dehydration may also occur. If you have a weakened immune system (especially if you have a T-cell count lower than 200) the symptoms may be worse and last longer.

HOW CAN I REDUCE MY RISK OF GETTING CRYPTOSPORIDIUM?

- **Wash your hands** often with soap and water, especially after using the bathroom, before eating and preparing foods, after changing diapers, touching animals, or after gardening.
- **Boil tap water** for at least 1 minute to kill cryptosporidium; chlorination of drinking water alone does not kill the organism. Once the boiled water has cooled, pour it into clean, dry, containers. Lemon or other flavorings may be added to improve the taste. Dishes, silverware, pots and pans may be washed with tap water as long as they are dry before they are used. Distilled water is also safe to use.

HOW IS A CRYPTOSPORIDIUM INFECTION DIAGNOSED?
A stool sample is taken by your doctor for examination under a microscope. Unless there are enough organisms in the stool to be detected, the test may not be completely accurate.

HOW IS A CRYPTOSPORIDIUM INFECTION TREATED?
- If your viral load and CD4 are at adequate levels your doctor will likely wait 7-14 days for the infection to resolve. You may need supportive treatment like fluid and electrolyte replenishment.
  - After 7-14 days if the infection is not resolved your doctor may give you a medication called nitazoxanide (Alinia)
- If your viral load and CD4 is low and you are not yet on HIV medication, your doctor may prescribe a medication regime for you and wait for the infection to resolve naturally as your immune system becomes stronger.
- Anti-diarrheal drugs may be temporarily helpful but ask your doctor before starting them.
- While you’re having diarrhea it’s important to stay hydrated and eat a nutritious diet.
Use a personal water filter that is certified for “cyst removal”. The package should say that the filter is certified by NSF International. The package may also say it uses a “standard #53” filter, which is able to remove crypto. The Pur Ultimate and Pur Plus brands are currently certified to remove crypto. Brita filters DO NOT remove cryptosporidium but may be used following proper filtration or boiling to improve taste.

Replace your filters according to schedule. Follow the directions provided when you purchase your filter to ensure that you filter is working at full capacity.

You can call NSF toll free at 1-877-867-3435 if you have any questions about purchasing a water filter. NSF is a not for profit organization that works on issues of water safety.

If you choose bottled water, look for water that is filtered to 1 micron or less. Safe choices of bottled water include: Naya, Poland Spring, Fiji, SPA, Spring Valley, and Saratoga, among others. You can call the Nutrition and Wellness Program at GMHC if you have any questions.

Use only boiled, distilled or properly filtered water to make ice cubes, brush your teeth, and dilute fruit juices from concentrate. At restaurants beware of reconstituted fruit juices, soda (from fountains), and ice cubes made with tap water. Commercially bottled soft drinks/seltzer and pasteurized juices such as Tropicana are safest.

Wash all fresh fruits and vegetables to remove debris, then rinse with boiled (and cooled), distilled, or properly filtered water before eating raw.

Avoid consuming unpasteurized milk products and unpasteurized apple cider.

Avoid fecal exposure during sex. If you have oral/anal contact (rimming), wash thoroughly before and after with soap and water and use a latex barrier.

Try not to swallow water while swimming in recreational pools. You can also protect others by avoiding swimming if you are having diarrhea.

The GMHC kitchen is equipped with an EverPure water filtration system. All fresh fruits and vegetables served are washed in filtered water. In addition, ice cubes and the water used to make coffee comes from this source.

IS NEW YORK CITY DRINKING WATER SAFE?
Low levels of crypto have been found in NYC drinking water. However, it is not clear whether healthy or immunocompromised people will get ill from these low levels. If you want to be on the safe side, follow the recommendations listed above.

STILL HAVE QUESTIONS?
The Nutrition Education and Wellness Program at GMHC are a great resource where you can get counseling and education to help you reduce your risk of becoming infected with cryptosporidiosis.

For more information call (212) 367-1259.