

Cryptosporidium is a microscopic protozoan parasite (not a bacterium or virus) that causes a gastrointestinal illness called cryptosporidiosis. Cryptosporidium exists in the environment in a form called an oocyst which is about five thousandths of a millimetre in diameter – less than one-tenth the thickness of a human hair.

In healthy individuals, cryptosporidiosis can last for a week but which may extend for up to three weeks. The main symptoms of cryptosporidiosis are diarrhoea and abdominal cramps.

The illness can be prolonged and life threatening in severely immunocompromised individuals. Such individuals already receive advice from their own doctor over precautions they should take to protect their health. This includes only drinking boiled water, whatever its source, avoiding certain foods and minimising contact with animals.

Where is Cryptosporidium found?

The parasite is commonly found in cattle, sheep, humans and many other mammals as well as birds, fish and reptiles. Waste from infected animals and humans contains large numbers of oocysts.

How is cryptosporidiosis transmitted?

People can develop cryptosporidiosis after coming into contact with Cryptosporidium oocysts. The oocysts are usually spread by contact with an infected animal, including domestic pets, from person to person or by consuming contaminated food, milk or water. Outbreaks have been associated with swimming in contaminated pools both in the UK and abroad.

Why is Cryptosporidium a problem for the water industry?

Cryptosporidium oocysts can be washed into rivers, streams and reservoirs from farms, livestock, septic tanks, private sewers and from the discharges of wastewater treatment works. Cryptosporidium is resistant to chlorine, the chemical we most commonly use to disinfect our drinking water. Outbreaks of gastroenteritis caused by Cryptosporidium have been linked to water supplies on a few occasions in the past, both in the UK and around the world.

In cases where the oocysts are detected in water supplies, and where the local health protection team considers it appropriate, the public may be advised to boil their water as a precaution before drinking.

What is the standard for Cryptosporidium in drinking water supplies?

There is no longer a standard for Cryptosporidium in drinking water. However, we are required by regulation to ensure that water is treated adequately at our water treatment works to remove any Cryptosporidium oocysts that may be present.

How is Cryptosporidium removed from the water?

A very effective way to minimise the risk from Cryptosporidium is to protect the raw water sources from contamination by careful catchment management.

However, United Utilities does not own all the land surrounding its reservoirs and river sources. The oocysts can be removed from the water by treatment processes at the water treatment works, primarily by processes called coagulation and filtration.

Coagulation occurs when a chemical is added to the water that causes impurities in the water to stick together and form large clumps. Sand filters can then remove these clumps before the water is disinfected and distributed to your tap.

Your water quality

If you're interested in finding out more about the quality of your drinking water, please visit unitedutilities.com/waterquality and enter your postcode. We'll tell you where your water comes from, together with other information such as its hardness.

For further information



unitedutilities.com/waterquality



0345 672 3723

8am - 8pm Mon-Fri

8am - 6pm Sat

8am - 12 noon Sun

The Drinking Water Inspectorate is responsible for ensuring the quality of public water supplies.

Visit their website at:

dwi.defra.gov.uk



About us

United Utilities is the North West's water company. We keep the taps flowing and toilets flushing for seven million customers every day. From Crewe to Carlisle, we work hard behind the scenes to help your life flow smoothly.

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