



## Shigella Health Alert for Gay, Bisexual, Men Who Have Sex with Men (GBMSM)

Last updated: February 13, 2026

**Shigella** outbreaks have been reported by Toronto Public Health amongst gay, bisexual, men who have sex with men (GBMSM)

### What is Shigella?

Shigella are bacteria (germs) that cause diarrhea. It is mostly found in feces (poop) or in food or water that is contaminated by a person who has the disease. *Shigella* bacteria cause an infection called shigellosis.

Shigella infection (shigellosis) is a common cause of bacterial gastroenteritis in Canada and worldwide. The [four species](#) of *Shigella* are:

- *Shigella sonnei*;
- *Shigella flexneri*
- *Shigella boydii*
- *Shigella dysenteriae*

### How is Shigella spread?

It can be passed on by:

- Sexual contact- usually from rimming (oral-anal contact), fingering, but also from other sexual activities where you might come in contact with bodily fluids or shit (poop) (whether you see it or not) from sex toys, used condoms, douching materials. The risk is present for any sexual activity involving stool exposure.
- *Shigella* can also be spread during sexual activity with a sick person.

- Consuming contaminated foods or beverages, including drinking contaminated liquids, such as recreational water from rivers, lakes, and other coastal waters, and avoiding swallowing water while swimming.
- Contact with contaminated surfaces, touching surfaces contaminated with *Shigella* bacteria (Read more [here](#))
- If you or someone you know has or recently had diarrhea, be sure to take steps to help prevent the spread of disease.

**Note:** *Shigella* spreads easily; you do not need to encounter much of the bacteria to make you sick.

## Symptoms of Shigellosis

Symptoms usually start around one to three days after being exposed but can start anywhere from 12 hours to seven days after exposure. They usually include:

- Watery or bloody diarrhea, which may contain mucus.
- Severe abdominal cramps.
- Tenesmus- feeling like you need poop even though you can't.
- Fever and malaise—generally feeling unwell
- Nausea and vomiting

The incubation period for *Shigella* is 1-7 days.

The following groups may be at greater risk of symptomatic infection: young children, travelers to countries with poor sanitation, people experiencing homelessness, seniors, GBMSM, and people with weakened immune including those living with HIV, cancer, and severe malnutrition.

## Diagnosis and Treatment by your Healthcare Provider

A diagnosis for *Shigella* is made by a laboratory test of the stool (poop). Whether you have [anti-biotic resistant \*Shigella\*](#) or not, most people recover on their own with lots of fluid hydration and rest. Read [here](#)

If you have *Shigella*, drink lots of fluid to avoid dehydration, or electrolyte replacement, and rest. People who have Shigellosis usually get better without antibiotic treatment in 5 to 7 days.

Moderate to severe infections may require treatment with antibiotics. If your diarrhea worsens or you have bloody diarrhea, do not self-medicate, seek medical care right away. Your healthcare provider will know the best course of treatment to treat *Shigella*.

**Note:** A person with Shigella infection can still have bacteria in their poop for up to four weeks after symptoms have gone away. More [here](#)

Shigellosis is a [nationally notifiable disease](#). Health professionals are to report cases to their provincial or territorial public health authorities.

Contact tracing is involved in case management of Shigellosis. However, in accordance with Personal Health Information Protection Act ([PHIPA](#)), investigators are to advise household/ sexual or any other exposed contacts of possible exposure to shigellosis without divulging information about the case unless there is express consent/permission from the case. It is important that contacts are educated and counselled and referred for testing.

### **Should you be concerned?**

Most people recover from Shigella without antimicrobial treatment. Oral rehydration is the most common treatment, and antibiotics are only recommended if you have severe disease or have a weakened immune system.

### **What can I do?**

Right now, just keep an eye out for it. If any of your sex partner(s) get symptoms consistent with Shigella, hold off from sexual activity and monitor yourself for symptoms for a few days. The incubation period for shigella is 1-7 days.

### **If you have been diagnosed with Shigella**

If you think you have Shigella, seek medical treatment if symptoms get worse or last longer than a week. You should also avoid preparing food for others, having sex, using public pools, or visiting a bathhouse or place where sex happens.

However, if you and your partner(s) have been diagnosed with Shigella, [do not have sex](#). Wait at least four weeks after diarrhea ends to have sex.

### **Some health promotion tips for GBMSM on sexual practices during a Shigella outbreak.**

We all know that sex isn't always as squeaky clean as it might be on a porn set. Some things you can do to avoid getting or spreading shigella through sex include:

- Avoid or limit rimming, fingering new partner (s) who have had sex with someone else in the last week.
- Wash your hands well and clean your butt and genital areas before and after sex.
- Pausing to wash your hands during sex if you've touched any shit (poop).
- That could mean moments like:
  - After pulling off a condom after or during anal sex.
  - After applying lube during anal sex
  - After fingering or fisting someone
  - After handling a sex toy that's been in someone's ass

The goal is to limit the possibility of small (sometimes invisible) amounts of poop from ending up in someone's mouth (including your own).

Avoiding ass-to-mouth (or ass-to-dick-to-mouth) activities with multiple partners, especially if they've had sex with someone else in the last week.

Avoid sharing sex toys without washing them thoroughly first between people.

If you're having sex with multiple people and using condoms, always use a new condom for each new person. Wash your hands after removing condoms and disposing of the condoms.

## References

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