

GIARDIASIS: "BACKPACKER'S DISEASE" IN THE ROCKY MOUNTAINS

Many of the pristine rivers, streams, and lakes in the Rocky Mountains now harbor the mastigophorean *Giardia lamblia*. *Giardia* can inhabit the intestine of humans, and wild and domestic animals. In the intestine, the parasites multiply by binary fission and thickly carpet the intestinal wall. Because the parasites are so numerous, a person or animal can shed millions of *Giardia* cysts in the feces. If a human or animal infected by the parasite defecates close to a body of water, the durable cysts can infect someone else who drinks the water even 2 to 3 months later. Dogs, cattle, beavers, deer, bear,

and other *Giardia* hosts add to the reservoir of contaminated feces and have helped to create the current situation.

In animals and humans, *Giardia* causes the disease **giardiasis**, commonly called "backpacker's disease." Giardiasis is exceedingly unpleasant and usually involves severe diarrhea and painful intestinal cramps that can last for days or weeks. Antiparasitic drugs can quickly cure the disease. However, the best advice is to avoid giardiasis in the first place by not drinking water from wilderness streams or lakes.