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Commentary

Protozoan Parasites: Biology, Transmission, Disease Processes, and Public Health

Kaelith Morrow*

Department of Parasitic Biology, Westhaven University, Cape Town, South Africa

DESCRIPTION

Protozoan parasites are microscopic single-celled organisms capable of living within or on the bodies of humans and other animals. Several protozoan species can cause disease in humans, particularly when they enter tissues, multiply within cells, or interfere with normal functions of the digestive system and other organs. These organisms have diverse structures and life cycles, and their transmission can occur through contaminated food and water, insect vectors, sexual contact, blood exposure, or direct contact between infected individuals. Understanding protozoan parasites is important for clinical medicine, epidemiology, laboratory diagnosis, environmental health, and disease prevention.

Protozoa are eukaryotic organisms, meaning that their cells contain a nucleus surrounded by a membrane. They can exist in different forms during their life cycles. Many intestinal protozoa have a resistant cyst stage that survives outside the host and a more active trophozoite stage that carries out feeding and multiplication within the host. The cyst form often contributes to transmission because it can withstand environmental conditions for longer periods than the active form. After ingestion, suitable conditions within the digestive tract may allow the cyst to release active forms that begin multiplying.

Giardia duodenalis is one of the most widely recognized intestinal protozoan parasites. It can be transmitted through drinking water, food, or surfaces contaminated with infectious cysts. After reaching the small intestine, the active forms attach to the intestinal lining and multiply. Infection can cause diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, bloating, nausea, excessive gas, and reduced nutrient absorption. Some infected individuals experience few symptoms, while others develop prolonged gastrointestinal problems. Safe drinking water, effective sanitation, and careful hand hygiene can reduce transmission.

Entamoeba histolytica is another intestinal protozoan capable of causing human disease. Infection usually occurs when infectious cysts are swallowed through contaminated food or water. The parasite reaches the large intestine, where active forms may develop and multiply. In some individuals, the organism can invade the intestinal lining and cause inflammation and ulceration. Severe infection may produce bloody diarrhea and abdominal pain. In less common cases, the parasite can spread beyond the intestine and affect organs such as the liver.

Cryptosporidium species are also important causes of intestinal disease. These parasites can be transmitted through contaminated drinking water, recreational water, food, and contact with infected individuals or animals. Their infectious stages can survive under environmental conditions that allow continued transmission. Infection commonly causes watery diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea, and dehydration. The illness may resolve in healthy individuals, but it can become more prolonged or severe in people with weakened immune defenses.

Cyclospora cayetanensis is an intestinal protozoan associated with foodborne and waterborne infections. Fresh produce contaminated during cultivation, handling, or preparation can become a source of infection. Symptoms may include prolonged watery diarrhea, abdominal discomfort, fatigue, reduced appetite, and weight loss. Because symptoms can continue for an extended period, laboratory testing may be needed to distinguish this infection from other causes of gastrointestinal illness.

Protozoan parasites are not limited to the digestive tract. Some species invade blood or tissues and can produce serious systemic disease. *Plasmodium* species, which cause malaria, are transmitted by infected female Anopheles mosquitoes. After entering the human body, the parasites undergo an initial developmental stage in the liver before entering red blood cells. Repeated cycles of infection within red blood cells contribute to fever and other clinical manifestations. Malaria remains a major infectious disease in many tropical and subtropical regions. Severe malaria can affect vital organs and may become life-threatening if not treated promptly. Symptoms commonly include fever, chills, sweating, headache, weakness, and muscle aches.

Correspondence to: Kaelith Morrow, Department of Parasitic Biology, Westhaven University, Cape Town, South Africa, E-mail: kaelith.morrow@westhaven.edu

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CONCLUSION

Diagnosis of protozoan infections requires suitable laboratory methods. Stool microscopy can identify cysts, trophozoites, or other parasite forms in intestinal infections. The effectiveness of these responses depends on the parasite species and its location within the body. Some protozoa have developed mechanisms that reduce immune recognition or interfere with immune signaling, allowing them to remain in the host for extended periods. However, the number of organisms present in a sample may vary over time, so repeated testing can sometimes be required. Antigen detection tests can identify molecules produced by particular parasites, while molecular techniques can detect parasite Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) or Ribonucleic Acid (RNA). Blood tests, microscopy, molecular analysis, and tissue examination may be used for parasites that affect organs outside the digestive tract.