



CHAGAS DISEASE

What is Chagas disease?

Chagas disease is a potentially life-threatening parasitic disease caused by the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi* (*T. cruzi*). It was named after the physician Carlos Chagas, who discovered the disease in 1909. Chagas disease is endemic to the Americas, mainly in rural Latin America, but it is estimated that there are approximately 300,000 people living with Chagas disease in the United States. Most people in the United States were infected in Latin America before arriving in the country, but there are cases of infection in the United States. For example, since Chagas disease became reportable in Texas, 126 cases were observed from 2013 to 2018 and 26 of them were infected in the United States.

How is Chagas disease spread?

Chagas disease is primarily spread through the feces (poop) of triatomine bugs, also known as kissing bugs or conenose bugs. *Triatoma sanguisuga* (*T. sanguisuga*), also known as the Eastern bloodsucking conenose, is present in Delaware. Further research is being conducted to determine where exactly the bugs are present in Delaware and how many are infected with *T. cruzi*. These bugs feed at night on the blood of animals, as well as humans, and tend to bite on the face of sleeping people (why they are called kissing bugs). When a person scratches the bite or rubs the area, they may accidentally rub triatomine bug feces in the bite wound, which could be contaminated with the *T. cruzi* parasite.

Infection can also occur from mother-to-baby, contaminated blood transfusions, contaminated organ donations, laboratory accidents, or food or drink contaminated with infected triatomine bug feces.

What are the symptoms of Chagas disease?

Chagas disease has an acute and a chronic phase. Acute Chagas disease occurs after infection and may last up to a few weeks or months. During the acute phase, symptoms include mild flu-like symptoms or swelling around the triatomine bite wound. Most people are asymptomatic and show no symptoms during this phase. After the acute phase, if untreated, infected people enter the chronic phase. About 70% to 80% of infected people in the chronic phase will remain asymptomatic their entire life and show no symptoms. However, 20% to 30% of infected people in the chronic phase will develop health problems years to decades later, which are often fatal. These chronic symptoms include arrhythmias, heart failure, megacolon, megaesophagus, and sudden death.



Frequently Asked Questions

How soon do symptoms appear?

Acute Chagas disease occurs immediately after infection and can last up to a few weeks or months. Not everyone shows symptoms.

Should an infected person be excluded from work or school?

An infected person does not need to be excluded from work or school.

How is Chagas disease diagnosed?

During the acute phase, *T. cruzi* parasites can be seen circulating in the blood, so the diagnosis of Chagas disease can be made by observing the parasites in blood smears. Diagnosis of chronic Chagas disease is made by testing for antibodies and by clinical findings.

What is the treatment for Chagas disease?

The CDC recommends parasitic treatment for people diagnosed in the acute phase, babies with congenital infection, and those with suppressed immune systems. Patients should consult with their primary health care provider.

What can a person or community do to prevent the spread of Chagas disease?

Not everyone is at risk for Chagas disease. The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) recommends screening persons who were born in or lived longer than six months in highly endemic regions (South America, Central America, or Mexico). Those who live in the southern United States or areas where triatomine bugs are present, who spend a lot of time outdoors camping or hunting, and who live in poorly constructed housing where triatomine bugs can access their sleeping areas, may also consider testing.

The best method of prevention is preventing triatomine bug bites. Make sure windows and doors have screens without holes and there are no cracks or crevices that allow kissing bugs to get into your house.

Resources

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/chagas/>

Triatomine bug identification,
https://www.cdc.gov/parasites/chagas/gen_info/vectors/index.html