

Disease Information Sheets

Chagas Disease (American Trypanosomiasis)



Introduction

Chagas disease is caused by the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi*, which is transmitted to animals and people by primarily night-feeding Triatomine insects known as “kissing bugs”. These insect vectors are found only in the Americas; mainly in rural areas of Latin America where poverty is widespread. However the impact of Chagas disease is not limited to Latin America’s rural areas: Large-scale population movements from rural to urban areas of Latin America and to other regions of the world have increased the geographic distribution of Chagas disease. Chagas disease is also referred to as American Trypanosomiasis.



Triatomine “kissing” bug



Countries with endemic Chagas Disease

How common is it?

Chagas disease is present in 21 countries in Central and South America, although cases have also been reported in Europe, the US and Japan. It is estimated that as many as 11 million people in Mexico, Central America and South America alone have Chagas disease, most of whom do not know they are infected. It kills at least 10-12,000 people each year.

Are travellers and/or expat workers at risk?

Yes. Travellers and expat workers are at risk if they stay in accommodation infested with the Triatomine insects that

transmit the disease. The bugs live in thatched roofs and cracks in the walls of mud huts and emerge to feed at night. They transmit the parasite when they bite the person, rubbing parasite-laden insect faeces into the bite wound.

The disease is also transmitted via food, particularly via contaminated fruit juice, and via contaminated blood transfusions.

What is the illness?

- Most people who are infected do not have any symptoms, although the initial illness can (rarely) be severe.
- Children who become infected may have a fever, swollen lymph nodes, enlarged liver and flu-like symptoms.
- If the infection enters via the eye there may be conjunctivitis and/or swelling of the eyelids on one side.
- The bite site may become inflamed, and a sore may develop that persists for around 2 months.
- Some people who are infected for a long time develop serious complications - heart and gastrointestinal damage.

Can it be treated?

Yes, in the early stages. If you think you have been bitten by a triatomine bug or you may have been infected by another route, seek the advice of an infectious diseases or tropical medicine specialist.

How can it be prevented?

- There is no vaccine.
- Prevention is by avoiding kissing bug bites.
 - Treat bedding with insecticide
 - Sleep under an insecticide-treated bed net
 - If possible avoid staying in poor quality housing where the bugs are found
 - Spray exposed skin with 30% DEET
- Avoid consuming locally-produced fruit juice from markets and street stalls.

CHAGAS DISEASE

No vaccine available

Use insect protection measures including a bed net

Avoid locally-produced fruit juice from markets



NEED MEDICAL ADVICE FOR YOUR WORK OR TRAVEL IN REMOTE AREAS?

Sentinel Consulting provides support services for people travelling and working in remote or resource-poor locations. Services include:

- Pre-travel medical screening and advice
- Risk management including risk assessment, emergency response planning and medical facility inspections
- 24-hour medical support from wilderness specialist doctors
- Operational support including call-ins, incident support and liaison
- Medical bags (prescription and non-prescription drugs) and first aid kits

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