

WHAT YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT CHAGAS DISEASE

In the Clinic
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What Is Chagas Disease?

Chagas disease is caused by infection with the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi*. Most commonly, people are infected by exposure to the triatomine bug in Mexico, Central America, or South America. About 30% of infected people later develop heart or gastrointestinal complications.

What Are the Risk Factors?

You may be at higher risk for Chagas disease if you:

- Lived in or spent more than 6 months in endemic areas of Mexico, Central America, or South America and parts of the United States
- Have a first-degree relative with Chagas disease
- Were born to an infected, untreated mother
- Consumed food or liquid contaminated with the triatomine vector
- Had a blood transfusion in the United States before 2007
- Received a transplanted organ from an infected donor

What Are the Symptoms and Long-Term Risks?

Most people have no or nonspecific symptoms, such as fever and lymph node swelling after acute infection. A firm swelling at the site of parasite entry, called a chagoma, may be present. Infected people then enter an asymptomatic ("indeterminate") phase. After years to decades, heart or gastrointestinal problems may develop. Heart problems may include heart failure (cardiomyopathy), rhythm disturbances, or clots in the heart leading to stroke. Symptoms include palpitations, chest pain, and shortness of breath. Gastrointestinal problems due to nerve damage may cause difficulty swallowing, abdominal pain, or constipation.

How Can It Be Prevented?

When visiting endemic areas, sleeping under bed nets, using insecticides, and avoiding consuming contaminated food or drink can help reduce the



risk for acute infection. Because acute infection often has no symptoms, screening persons at high risk (people from endemic countries) is important in order to identify, treat, and prevent complications of chronic disease.

How Is It Treated?

Antiparasitic medications (benznidazole and nifurtimox) are approved for treating children. Although medications are not approved for adults, physicians may choose to treat adults under the practice of medicine. Treatment is recommended for people with acute infection, children, and women of childbearing age and can be considered for those with chronic infection before development of severe cardiac complications. Side effects include rash, gastrointestinal symptoms, nerve problems, or dizziness. Alcohol should be avoided during treatment. Antibody test results may take years to decades to revert to negative after treatment.

Questions for My Doctor

- Am I at risk for Chagas disease?
- What is my risk for transmitting Chagas disease?
- Should I be screened for Chagas disease?
- What is my risk for getting a more serious condition?
- What symptoms should I watch out for that may point to chronic Chagas disease?
- How often should I get a follow-up checkup?
- Should I follow up with a specialist?

For More Information



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Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

www.cdc.gov/parasites/chagas/resources/chagas_protect_your_baby.pdf
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www.cdc.gov/parasites/chagas/resources/es/informativa_breve.pdf

Pan American Health Organization

www.paho.org/en/node/57390