

What is Chagas disease?

Chagas disease is an infectious disease caused by the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi*, which is found in the feces of an insect known as the triatomine bug. These bugs are often referred to as 'kissing bugs' because they frequently bite humans on the face. Chagas disease is also referred to as American trypanosomiasis and is common in South America, Central America and Mexico. Rare cases of Chagas disease have also been found in the southern United States.

How is Chagas disease spread?

Triatomine bugs can become infected when they ingest blood from an animal already infected with the parasite. Once infected, the bugs pass *T. cruzi* parasites in their feces. You can become infected if *T. cruzi* parasites enter the body through your eyes, mouth, a cut or scratch, or the wound from the bug's bite.

Once in your body, the parasites multiply and spread. Chagas disease is not transmitted from person-to-person like a cold or the flu or through casual contact with infected people or animals.

The bugs are found in houses made from materials such as mud, adobe, straw, and palm thatch and in areas such as dog kennels, wood or rock piles or in rodents' nests (especially Woodrats). During the night, when people are sleeping, the bugs emerge. The sleeping person may accidentally scratch or rub the feces into the bite wound, eyes, or mouth.

Chagas disease may also be spread by:

- Eating uncooked food contaminated with feces from infected bugs
- Congenital transmission (from an infected pregnant woman to her baby)
- Having a blood transfusion containing infected blood
- Getting an organ transplant containing *T. cruzi*
- Working in a laboratory where there's an accidental exposure to the parasite
- Spending time in a forest that contains infected wild animals, such as raccoons and opossums.

What are the signs and symptoms of Chagas disease?

Chagas disease can cause a sudden, brief illness (acute), or it may be a long-lasting (chronic) condition. Symptoms range from mild to severe, although many people don't experience symptoms until the chronic stage.

Acute phase

The acute phase of Chagas disease, which lasts for weeks or months, is often symptom-free. When signs and symptoms do occur, they are usually mild and may include:

- Swelling at the infection site
- Fever
- Fatigue
- Rash
- Body aches
- Eyelid swelling
- Headache
- Loss of appetite
- Nausea, diarrhea or vomiting

- Swollen glands
- Enlargement of your liver or spleen

Signs and symptoms that develop during the acute phase usually go away on their own. If left untreated, the infection continues and, in some cases, advances to the chronic phase.

Chronic phase

Signs and symptoms of the chronic phase of Chagas disease may occur 10 to 20 years after initial infection, or they may never occur. In severe cases, however, Chagas disease signs and symptoms may include:

- Irregular heartbeat
- Congestive heart failure
- Sudden cardiac arrest
- Difficulty swallowing due to enlarged esophagus
- Abdominal pain or constipation due to enlarged colon

Who is most at risk?

People who:

- Live in poor rural areas of Central America, South America and Mexico
- Live in a residence that contains triatomine bugs, or
- People who receive a blood transfusion or organ transplant from a person who carries the infection.

Travelers to South America, Central America and Mexico who sleep indoors in well-constructed buildings are at low risk to contract Chagas disease.

How is Chagas disease diagnosed?

Your healthcare provider will conduct a physical exam, asking about your symptoms and any factors that put you at risk of Chagas disease.

If you have the signs and symptoms of Chagas disease, blood tests can confirm the presence of the *T. cruzi* parasite.

How is Chagas disease treated?

Treatment with specific drugs for Chagas disease is recommended for people diagnosed in the acute phase of infection, congenital infection, and for those with weakened immune systems. Treatment for Chagas disease focuses on killing the parasite and managing signs and symptoms.

Once Chagas disease reaches the chronic phase, medications won't cure the disease. But, the drugs may be offered to people younger than 50 years of age because they may help slow the progression of the disease.

How can Chagas disease be prevented?

- Avoid sleeping in a mud, thatch or adobe house, and use insecticide-soaked netting over your bed when sleeping in thatch, mud or adobe houses.
- Use insecticides to remove insects from your residence.
- Use insect repellent on exposed skin.

Where can I get more information?

- Your personal healthcare provider
- [Centers for Disease Control & Prevention](#)
- [Utah Department of Health](#)

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