

Babesiosis

Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention
An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

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What is babesiosis?

Babesiosis is a potentially severe tick-borne disease caused by a parasite that infects red blood cells.

How is babesiosis transmitted?

Babesiosis is transmitted by the bite of an infected deer tick. The longer a tick remains attached and feeding, the higher the likelihood that it may transmit the parasite. The tick must generally be attached for at least 24 to 36 hours before it can transmit the disease. The tick is carried by deer, deer mice and other small mammals. This is the same type of tick that can transmit ehrlichiosis and Lyme disease. Deer ticks are capable of transmitting more than one of these diseases in a single bite. Transmission can also occur through the transfusion of contaminated blood. Blood donors without symptoms may be able to pass the disease for as long as 12 months after the initial infection. Two cases of mother-to-infant transmission have been reported.

What are the symptoms of babesiosis?

Babesiosis can cause fever, fatigue and anemia lasting several days to several months. Some individuals have been known to get babesiosis and not show any sign of the disease.

When do symptoms appear?

Signs and symptoms of babesiosis can appear anywhere from 1 week to 8 weeks after infection. However, in some cases it may take longer than 8 weeks.

What is the treatment for babesiosis?

Babesiosis can be treated with antibiotics prescribed by your doctor. Serious complications requiring a blood transfusion and/or kidney dialysis can occur if the disease is not recognized and treated early.

Who gets babesiosis?

Anyone can get babesiosis but it occurs most frequently in the elderly, in individuals without a healthy spleen and in individuals whose immune systems are impaired. Human cases of this disease have been reported in the northeastern United States with most occurring during late spring, summer and fall.

What can be done to prevent babesiosis?

Prevention depends upon avoiding tick bites. When in areas that may be tick infested, the following recommendations can reduced the risk of getting babesiosis:

- Wear light colored clothing so that ticks can be seen and easily removed. Wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants and tuck your pant legs into your socks.
- Walk in the center of trails to avoid brushing up against shrubs and tall grass.
- Use insect repellants containing permethrin or DEET. If such products are used, follow the manufacturer's directions.
- Conduct thorough tick checks on yourself and children after spending time in tick-infested areas and promptly remove any ticks that are found. Special attention should be given to the head, neck and behind the ears. Ticks may also attach to areas of tight clothing.
- Maintaining tick-free pets will also decrease exposure. Pets should be inspected daily and ticks removed promptly. Appropriate veterinary products may be used to prevent ticks on pets. Consult a veterinarian for information.

How should a tick be removed?

To remove a tick that has attached to the skin, grasp the tick with a pair of tweezers as close as possible to the skin. Pull straight out without twisting motions. Avoid squeezing or puncturing the body of the tick because it may contain infectious fluids. After tick removal, wash the bite site and your hands with soap and water and apply a disinfectant or an antibiotic ointment to the site.

How do I obtain information on a tick?

You can have a tick identified by sending it to the Maine Medical Center Research Lab. For specific instructions on how to submit a tick, please go to the Maine Medical Center Research Center website at www.mmcri.org/lyme/submit.html.

Babesiosis in Maine

Babesiosis is relatively uncommon in Maine. Typically there are less than a dozen cases reported each year. Cases are most commonly found in the southern and coastal counties of Maine which also have displayed high tick populations. For more information on the number of babesiosis cases reported in Maine, please visit the Maine CDC website: <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/boh/newpubs.htm> and refer to the Infectious Epidemiology Program Documents.

Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider or local health center. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> - is another excellent source of health information.