

Ehrlichiosis

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 ehrlichiosis?

Ehrlichiosis is a bacterial disease that can be carried by the lone star tick. These bacteria can infect human white blood cells and cause illness.

How do people catch this disease?

Ehrlichiosis is passed to humans by the bite of an infected lone star tick. This tick is rarely found in Maine. In a small number of cases, ehrlichiosis has been spread through blood transfusions.

What are the symptoms of this disease?

The symptoms range from very mild to very severe illness. They include fever, headache, chills, tiredness, muscle pain, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, eye redness, confusion, and rash. More severe symptoms can include difficulty breathing and bleeding disorders. In severe cases, the disease can be fatal. Very few people experience all of the symptoms associated with the disease. Older or immunocompromised individuals are more likely to suffer a more serious illness.

How soon after a tick bite will symptoms appear?

The average time from tick bite to illness is 5 – 10 days.

Who is at risk for this disease?

Anyone can be infected with the bacteria that cause ehrlichiosis. People who spend time outdoors in tick-infested areas are at greatest risk for exposure. It is most commonly found in the southeastern and south-central areas of the United States. Co-infections with other tick-borne diseases, including babesiosis, Lyme disease, and anaplasmosis, have been documented.

How is it diagnosed?

Ehrlichiosis and other tick-borne illnesses can only be diagnosed by a health-care provider. If you think that you or a family member have signs of illness compatible with ehrlichiosis you should speak with your provider. Your provider will make a diagnosis based upon clinical and laboratory findings.

What is the treatment?

Ehrlichiosis is treatable with antibiotics. People are usually treated for 5 – 7 days.

What can I do to protect myself from this disease?

The best way to prevent illness is to avoid being bitten by the ticks that transmit the disease.

- Use an EPA approved repellent when outdoors. Always follow the instructions on the label.
- Wear protective clothing such as long-sleeved shirts, pants, and socks when outdoors. Tuck your pant legs into your socks. Light colored clothing makes it easier to see ticks.
- Use caution in tick infested areas.
- Check your body and clothing daily for the presence of ticks after spending time outdoors and remove ticks immediately if found.
- Keep your pets tick free – inspect them daily for ticks and consult a veterinarian for information on products that are safe for use on animals.
- If a tick is attached, remove it promptly and properly.

How should a tick be removed?

- Using tweezers: grab the tick close to the skin and using firm steady pressure pull the tick straight out. Do not use twisting motions.
- Using a tick spoon: place the wide part of the notch on the skin near the tick. Apply slight pressure downward on the skin and slide the spoon forward so that the small part of the notch is framing the tick. Continuous sliding motion of the spoon detaches the tick.
- Avoid crushing the tick's body because its bodily fluids may be harmful. Also, do not use petroleum jelly, hot matches, nail polish remover, dish soap, or any other substance to remove the tick. Using those items could increase the risk of infection.
- Save the tick for identification, which can help with the diagnosis of tick-borne illnesses

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 or visiting the website <http://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/infectious-disease/epi/vector-borne/index.shtml>. The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website - <http://www.cdc.gov> – is another excellent source of health information.