

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever

Fact Sheet



Maine Center for Disease
Control and Prevention

An Office of the
Department of Health and Human Services

What is Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever?

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is one of the most severe tick-borne illnesses in the United States. RMSF is rarely reported in Maine. Maine residents may become infected when traveling to other states where it is more common, such as North Carolina and Oklahoma. This disease is caused by infection with the *Rickettsia rickettsii* bacteria.

What are the signs and symptoms of RMSF?

Initial symptoms may include fever, nausea, vomiting, muscle pain, lack of appetite, and severe headache. Later signs and symptoms include: rash, abdominal pain, joint pain, and diarrhea. RMSF can be a severe illness, and the majority of patients are hospitalized.

How is RMSF spread?

The organism that causes RMSF is transmitted by the bite of an infected tick. The American dog tick, the brown dog tick and Rocky Mountain wood tick transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever bacteria in the United States.

How is RMSF treated?

RMSF is best treated by using the drug doxycycline.

How can you know for sure if you have RMSF?

A diagnosis of RMSF is based on clinical signs, symptoms and laboratory tests.

How can RMSF be prevented?

Limiting exposure to ticks reduces the chance of infection with RMSF. In persons exposed to ticks, prompt careful inspection and removal of crawling or attached ticks is an important method of preventing disease. Pay special attention to personal protection when exposed to areas where ticks are present:

- Wear light-colored clothing which allows you to see ticks that are crawling on your clothing.
- Tuck your pants legs into your socks so that ticks cannot crawl up the inside of your pants legs.
- Apply EPA-approved repellents to discourage tick attachment. Repellents containing

permethrin can be sprayed on boots and clothing, and will last for several days.

- Conduct a tick check upon return from potentially tick-infested areas by searching your entire body for ticks. Use a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body. Remove any tick you find on your body.
- Parents should check their children for ticks, especially in the hair, when returning from potentially tick-infested areas. Ticks may also be carried into the household on clothing and pets and only attach later, so both should be examined carefully to remove ticks.

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 illness

Where can I get more information?

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