

Chaga's Disease (American Trypanosomiasis)

Chaga's disease is a serious parasitic disease caused by the parasite Trypanosoma cruzi. It is available throughout South/ Central America, Mexico, and much of the U.S. south, as well as California and Tennessee.

It is usually acquired by the bite of blood-sucking reduvid bug (triatomine or "Kissing bugs") that particularly present in dwellings with thatched roofs and mud construction. It can also be acquired by way of infected blood transfusion and from an infested pregnant mother to her fetus.

Although the acute infections can cause a several months' nonspecific illness, most who are untreated go on to chronic infection with no symptoms or signs of infection. 20-30% of those develop serious heart damage (rhythm disturbances, heart failure, and even sudden cardiac death).

The parasite can also damage the gastrointestinal tract causing severe constipation and difficulty swallowing.

The infection can be diagnosed by blood smears for the parasite as well as blood PCR testing for the parasite during the early or acute phase of the infection when there are symptoms.

In the chronic (asymptomatic) phase, diagnosis is established by blood antibody tests for T. cruzi by two positive antibody tests by two different methodologies.

Benznidazole and nifurtimox are used for treatment.

Who should be screened for disease?

1. Anyone who has lived in South/Central America or Mexico for at least 6 months.

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2. Anyone whose mother lived at least 6 months in the above areas prior to or during pregnancy with them.
3. Contact with such insects in the U.S. or Latin America.
4. Women considering pregnancy with the above exposure history (treatment can reduce risks of transmission of the parasite to a fetus by 95%)
5. Immune compromised and organ transplant patients with above exposures.

Discussion: These issues are particularly relevant to a significant part of the U.S. population (whether migrants or citizens) with the stated exposure history, or risk serious and even fatal longterm complications that may take decades to become evident.

Anyone who fits this profile can contact us about testing to screen for chronic Trypanosoma cruzi infection and Chaga's disease.

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