

PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

Babesiosis



Burlington County Health Department

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Public Health
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Burlington County Health Department
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What is babesiosis?

Babesiosis is a preventable and treatable parasitic disease which is spread by the bite of certain types of ticks.

Where is babesiosis found?

Babesiosis is found most often in coastal areas in the northeastern United States mainly in parts of New England, New York state, New Jersey, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. It peaks during the warmer months.

How is babesiosis spread?

The germ is usually spread by the bite of an infected tick. Deer ticks cling to plants near the ground in brushy, wooded or grassy places. The ticks, which cannot jump or fly, climb onto animals and people who brush against the plants. Very young ticks, called larvae, which are no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence, pick up the germ that causes babesiosis by biting infected small animals, such as the white-footed mouse. Slightly older ticks, called nymphs, that are the size of a poppy seed, are the stage most likely to bite and infect humans. Adult deer ticks can also transmit the disease, but they are not as great a risk as nymphs. This is because adults are less likely to bite humans and they are easier to see and remove. Adult deer ticks are about the size of a sesame seed. The highest risk of disease occurs between late May and early autumn, when ticks are most active. The tick must be attached and feeding for about 36-48 hours before it can pass the germ to a person.

What are the symptoms of babesiosis?

Most people who are infected by the parasite will show very mild signs of illness or no signs at all. Symptoms begin to happen gradually about 1-8 weeks after being bitten by an infected tick and can include fever, chills, headache, achy joints and muscles, fatigue, nausea or loss of appetite, vomiting, and abdominal pain. Symptoms can last from several days to several months. The elderly, people without a healthy spleen, and people who have weakened immune systems are more likely to develop potentially life-threatening symptoms. It is also possible to get babesiosis and other diseases spread by ticks (like Lyme disease) from the same tick bite. People who get more than one of these diseases at the same time may be more seriously affected.

Is there a treatment for babesiosis?

In most cases, babesiosis can be effectively treated with antimicrobials. People who do not have symptoms do not need to be treated.

How can you prevent babesiosis?

There is currently no vaccine available to prevent babesiosis. The best prevention is to avoid tick bites. If possible, avoid areas infested with ticks, especially during warm months. Deer ticks are most numerous near the ground in brushy, wooded or high grassy areas. Ticks are most active during the months of April through September. If you live in or visit an area likely to have deer ticks, take the following precautions:

- Wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants, and tuck your pant legs tightly into your socks. (Light colors will help you spot the ticks on your clothes before they reach your skin.)
- Stay to the middle of paths when walking or hiking.
- On exposed skin use a repellent that contains the active ingredient DEET (the chemical N-N-diethyl-meta-toluamide). Always follow the directions on the label. DEET can be poisonous if overused. Avoid using repellents with DEET concentrations above 10-15% for children and with concentrations above 30-35% for adults. Do not apply repellents to the hands or faces of young children. Repellents should never be used on infants. Cream, lotion or stick formulas with low amounts of alcohol are best for use on the skin. The insecticide permethrin, which kills ticks on contact, can also be used to protect against ticks. In order to work well, this chemical can only be used on clothing.
- Make the area around your home less attractive to ticks by removing leaf litter and brush, mowing lawns regularly, and trimming low-lying bushes. Keeping woodpiles and birdfeeders off the ground and in sunny areas away from your home can help keep away rodents that may have ticks on them. If you use pesticides around your home, always follow the label instructions and never use pesticides near streams or other bodies of water.
- Talk to your veterinarian about the best way to protect your pets against ticks.
- Check yourself, your children, and your pets for ticks every day. Remember deer ticks, especially the nymphs, are only the size of a poppy seed. Their favorite places to attach are on the legs, in the groin, in the armpits, along the hairline, and in or behind the ears.
- Remove any ticks promptly using fine point tweezers. Do not use your bare fingers to remove a tick. Grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible and, without squeezing or twisting, pull the tick straight out with steady pressure. Once removed, disinfect the area with rubbing alcohol.
- Know the symptoms of babesiosis. If you have been someplace likely to have ticks between April and September and you develop babesiosis symptoms, see a doctor right away.

Where can you get more information?

- Your doctor, nurse or clinic
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/>
- The Burlington County Department of Health at (609)-265-5548.
- The New Jersey Department of Health (NJDOH) at (609) 588-7465 or on the NJDOH Website at <http://www.nj.gov/health/>