

Babesiosis

Frequently Asked Questions

What is babesiosis?

Babesiosis (bab-ee-see-oh-sis) is a disease caused by infection with the parasite *Babesia microti*. The parasite is carried by ticks. This parasite infects the red blood cells.

Babesiosis occurs most often in coastal areas in the northeastern United States.

How is babesiosis spread?

Babesiosis is spread by the bite of an infected tick. It is also possible to get babesiosis from a contaminated blood transfusion.

Who gets babesiosis?

Babesiosis is seen most frequently, and tends to be more severe, among the elderly and people with weak immune systems. Weak immune systems can be caused by HIV/AIDS infection, certain drugs (such as those used to treat cancer or for transplant patients) and some diseases that run in families (inherited diseases). People who have had their spleen removed are also at greater risk for infection and complications from this illness.

What are the symptoms of babesiosis?

The most common early symptoms may include:

- Fatigue (tiredness)
- Loss of appetite
- General ill feeling
- Low red blood cell count (hemolytic anemia)

As the infection continues, additional symptoms may include:

- Fever
- Drenching sweats
- Muscle aches
- Headache

Symptoms can occur anywhere from 1 to 8 weeks (usually 4 weeks) after being bitten by an infected tick.

How is babesiosis diagnosed?

If a health care provider suspects babesiosis, samples of the patient's blood will be examined.

What is the treatment for babesiosis?

There is no standard treatment for babesiosis. A combination of drugs that kill parasites can be effective.

Can people with babesiosis pass the illness to others?

Babesiosis is not spread from person to person through casual contact. An infected person can only spread the disease if their blood is used for a transfusion. A person's blood may be able to spread the infection to others for as long as 12 months after their symptoms have ended. A mother can spread babesiosis to her unborn baby.

How can babesiosis be prevented?

You can reduce your risk by taking these actions to avoid tick bites, or to safely remove a tick if you are bitten:

- Avoid wooded areas with tall grass, dense shrubs, and leaf litter, where ticks like to hide.
- Make your yard less attractive to ticks by mowing lawns and trimming trees.
- Wear solid, light-colored clothing. This will make it easier to find a tick on your clothes.
- Tuck your pants into your socks and wear a long-sleeved shirt. This will help prevent a tick from attaching to your skin.
- Use EPA-registered insect repellents on yourself and your pets. Repellents that contain DEET can be used on clothing and exposed skin. The other type of repellent contains permethrin and should **ONLY** be used on clothing. Always read and follow label directions carefully.
- Check yourself for ticks frequently when you are in tick-infested areas. Check again after returning and again before going to bed. Don't overlook some of ticks' favorite hiding places – on the scalp, behind the ears, under the arms, on the ankles, and in the groin.

What should I do if I find a tick?

- If you find a tick, remove it immediately before it attaches to the skin. Do not squeeze or crush it with bare hands.
- If a tick has already attached to the skin, use tweezers to grasp it by the head (not just the body) as close to the skin as possible. Pull steadily until the tick pulls out (expect some resistance).
- Never squeeze an attached tick, burn it, or cover it with Vaseline or any other substance. Doing so could force fluid from the tick into your skin.
- After removing a tick, disinfect the bite area and tweezers with alcohol, and wash your hands with soap and hot water.

How should I dispose of a tick?

Place the tick in a sealed container or small plastic bag and put it in the trash. Do not flush ticks down the toilet because they can easily survive in the water.

Where can I get more information?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/babesia/default.htm

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention