Chagas Disease

Provider Fact Sheet

What is Chagas disease?
Chagas disease is caused by a parasite called Trypanosoma cruzi and is spread by infected bugs called triatomines.

Where is Chagas found?
Endemic throughout much of Mexico, Central and South America

Who is at risk?
- Persons living in the U.S. who have migrated from these areas
- Estimates of 300,000 or more infected Latin Americans living in the U.S.

How is the disease transmitted?
- Triatomines thrive in poorly constructed and usually rural housing, typically living within mud walls and thatched roofs
- During the night, the bugs emerge from their hiding places to feed, defecate, and thus inoculate
- Also transmitted by:
  - Blood transfusion
  - Organ transplantation
  - Congenitally
  - Lab accidents (rare)
  - Food and drink (rare)
  - Vectorborne (rare in the U.S.)
- Screening for Chagas disease in U.S. blood supply instituted in early 2007

What are the phases of the disease?

Acute
- 4–8 weeks
- Asymptomatic or characterized by mild illness

Chronic
- Indeterminate
  - Typically asymptomatic for years or decades
- Symptomatic
  - 20–30% of chronically infected persons develop symptomatic disease
  - Cardiac disease beginning with conduction abnormalities may be followed by apical aneurysm and thrombus formation
  - Gastrointestinal manifestations
  - Increased risk of stroke

Diagnosing Chagas disease
- Detailed patient history including having seen the bug and having lived within mud walls or thatched roofs, in a country with known Chagas risk
- Hispanic patients may be familiar with other names for the insect such as “kissing bug,” “benchuca,” “vinchuca,” “chinche” or “barbeiro”
- Serum samples may be sent to CDC through your state health department
- Patients should be reassured that contact for testing or treatment will have no effect on immigration status

Treatment of Chagas disease
- Two drugs, nifurtimox and benznidazole, are worldwide standard antiparasitic treatment
- Drugs available from CDC for use under investigational protocols for compassionate treatment
- For more information, please visit the Chagas website at www.cdc.gov/parasites/chagas and click “Resources for Health Professionals” or call 770.488.7775 for clinical consults
- Fact sheets and contact information provided on the web

Chagas Disease may be life-threatening in both the acute and chronic phases of the infection.