



# Chagas disease (and chronic complications)

Last update: 2023-06-21

## Key facts

### Transmission

Direct or indirect contact with the parasite (reservoir is triatomine bugs, and the parasite is spread through their faeces/poop), mother-to-newborn transmission, blood transfusion

- Triatomine bugs spread Chagas disease through their poop
  - They bite people, usually at night, and then leave waste (poop) near the bite mark. If the poop enters the bite, the person can get Chagas disease (direct contact)
- Eating undercooked or unwashed food that is infected with poop from the triatomine bug (indirect contact)
- If a pregnant woman has Chagas, the disease can be transmitted to the newborn around the time of birth
- Other transmission modes exist but these rarely cause epidemics (for example during blood transfusion or vertical mother-child transmission)

### Most vulnerable to severe consequences

- Elderly
- Newborns
- People with chronic medical conditions (such as arthritis, high blood pressure, diabetes, heart disease, etc.)
- People who have weakened immune systems (for example, people living with HIV/AIDS or cancer)

**Early symptoms: \*\* In most cases, symptoms are absent or very mild. \*\***

- Skin lesions
- Purple swelling of one eyelid
- Fever

- Enlarged lymph nodes
- Headache
- Body aches, muscle pain, swelling
- Pale skin
- Difficulty breathing
- Abdominal pains
- Chest pain

### **Chronic symptoms**

- Chest pain
- Stomach problems (difficulty eating or passing faeces/poop)
- Confusion, dizziness

## **What can you do to prevent and control an epidemic?**

### **Reservoir control and prevention**

- Elimination of triatomine bugs (for example, spraying dwellings or surrounding areas with insecticides)
- Promote household and community clean-up campaigns to prevent bug infestation
- Prevent triatomine bites by advocating the use of:
  - Insect screens on windows and doors and
  - Personal protection (application of repellents, wearing long sleeved clothes)
  - Bed nets

### **Monitoring the community and identifying sick people**

- Identify people in the community with suspected Chagas disease

### **Treatment and management**

- Rapidly detect and refer serious cases to health facilities
- Refer all pregnant women with suspected infection to health facilities
- Provide psychosocial support to the sick person and their family members

## Food hygiene and safety

- Promote cooking meat and other animal products thoroughly
- Promote thorough cleaning, cooking and storage of food
  - Cover and store food safely (protected from insect/animal contamination)
  - Use clean utensils and storage containers

## Social mobilization and health promotion

- Find out the specific advice being given by health and other relevant authorities
- Model following this advice and inform community members of current health practice advice
- Offer support and encouragement to follow the advice
  - Try to gain understanding about if and why health practice advice is not being followed
- With the advice of your supervisor and health authorities, work with communities to overcome barriers to following health advice and recommended practices
- Identify if there are any community spaces where women give birth and engage with traditional birth attendants to share information about the disease transmission and prevention modes

# Mapping and community assessment

- Make a map of the community.
- Mark the following information on the map:
  - How many people have fallen sick with chagas disease? Where?
  - How many people have died? Where? When?
  - Who and where are the vulnerable people?
  - Where are the local health facilities and services? (Include traditional healers)
  - Where do women give birth? (include traditional birth attendants)
- Record the following information on the back of the map:
  - When did people start to fall sick with Chagas disease?
  - How many people live in the affected community? How many are pregnant women?
  - How common is it for people to live in houses with insect screens on windows and doors?
  - How common is it for people to sleep under bed nets?
  - Are children badly affected by Chagas disease? Are there other groups (specific ages, occupations, geographic areas, etc.) that are badly affected?
  - What are the community's habits, practices and beliefs regarding use of repellents, sprays, etc?
  - Have the authorities established a vector control programme?
  - Is a social mobilization or health promotion programme in place?
  - Which sources do people use/trust the most for information?
    - Are there rumours or misinformation about Chagas disease? What are the rumours?