



# Atlantic County Division of Public Health

## *Questions and Answers about Babesiosis*

### **What is babesiosis?**

Babesiosis is a rare, sometimes severe or fatal tick-borne disease caused by *Babesia microti*, a red blood cell parasite. Babesiosis occurs most frequently in elderly or immunocompromised individuals.

### **Who can get babesiosis?**

Anyone can get babesiosis. Cases of this disease have been reported throughout the year, but peak in late spring or early summer.

### **How is babesiosis spread?**

*Babesia* is transmitted by the bite of the blacklegged tick, *Ixodes scapularis*. Larval and nymphal ticks become infected by feeding on infected mice or meadow voles. The nymph and adult stages of this tick may feed on humans. Transmission occurs rarely through blood transfusion.

### **What are the symptoms of babesiosis?**

The disease can cause fever, fatigue, jaundice and anemia lasting from several days to several months. Many infections can occur without producing symptoms.

### **How soon after infection do symptoms appear?**

Clinical illness usually occurs 1-4 weeks after infection. Rarely it may take up to 12 months for symptoms to appear.

### **Does past infection with babesiosis make a person immune?**

It is not known whether past infection with babesiosis can make a person immune.

### **How is babesiosis diagnosed?**

The diagnosis is made by microscopic examination for the parasite on a blood smear, or by blood tests for antibody to the parasite.

### **What is the treatment for babesiosis?**

Most people have mild illnesses and recover without specific treatment. Combination therapy is usually recommended, typically with clindamycin and quinine or azithromycin and quinine or atovaquone.

### **How can babesiosis be prevented?**

When in tick-infested areas (i.e., tall grass, overgrown brush, etc.), special precautions should be taken. Wear light-colored clothing, tuck pants' legs into socks and wear closed toe shoes. Use commercial insect repellent with no more than 20% - 30% DEET. Use repellents sparingly and with care, as they may cause side effects, especially in young children. Avoid application to damaged skin. When returning from outdoors it is important to check yourself, your children and your pets for ticks. Look for ticks in all joint areas, the navel, behind ears, in the hairline and in other skin folds. Wash all skin treated with insect repellent thoroughly. Keep your lawn mowed and cut overgrown brush.



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#### **How should a tick be removed?**

Remove attached ticks as soon as possible. Use tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin surface as possible. Pull up on the tick with slow, even pressure to gradually ease out the mouth parts. If tweezers are not available, use fingers shielded with tissue paper or rubber gloves. Do not handle ticks with bare hands. Do not use petroleum jelly, nail polish remover, or heat to remove the tick, since these methods may increase the risk of infection with a tick-borne disease. Do not squash or squeeze the tick during removal. Wash the area of the tick bite and your hands with soap and water after the tick is removed. When outdoors, in tick-infested areas, check every 2 to 3 hours for ticks attached to clothing or skin.

For more information about babesiosis, call the Atlantic County Division of Public Health at 609-645-5935.

*Information provided by the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene*

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