KENTUCKY STATE UNIVERSITY
COOPERATIVE EXTENSION
INFO SHEET

Kentucky State University Cooperative Extension Connections

Chagas Disease

Background

Chagas disease is a parasitic infection that has afflicted people in South and Central America for thousands of years. Today, about 8 million people in the Americas are infected, and approximately 10,000 deaths occur annually due to complications from the disease. There is growing concern that Chagas disease could spread into new regions, including the United States, as temperatures continue to rise.

Host

Kissing bugs, also known as "coneheads," are blood-feeding insects in the assassin bug family (Reduviidae). They received the name "kissing bug" because they often bite people around the mouth or face while they sleep. These insects feed on the blood of humans and other animals and can transmit the parasite that causes Chagas disease.

Identification

Kissing bugs are black with orange markings along the edges of their abdomen. They have a long, narrow head with prominent eyes and a beak-like mouth. Their body is pear shaped and flattened. They are about ½ to 1 inch long.

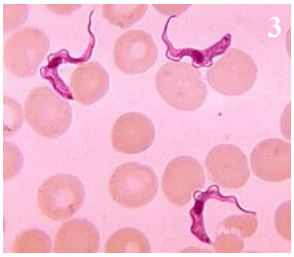
Nymphs closely resemble adults but are smaller, do not have wings, and tend to be rounder in body shape.





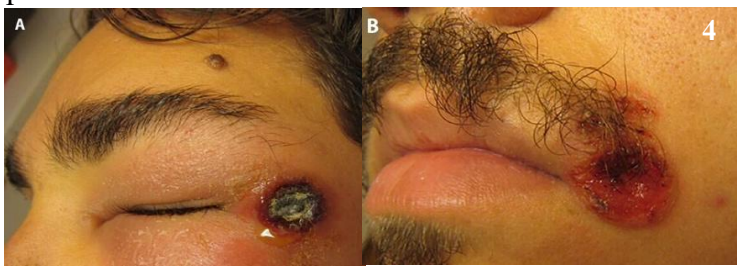
Parasite

Chagas disease is caused by the protozoan parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi,* which lives in the digestive tract of kissing bugs. It is estimated that roughly half of kissing bugs are infected. Kissing bugs transmit the parasite by biting and defecating near the wound. Transmission can also occur through organ transplants and from mother to infant during birth.



Symptoms and Diagnosis

Kissing bug bites often start as inflamed sores with a central mark, then expand over several days. Bites often occur when people are sleeping. It is important to take note of any suspicious sores on the lips and face.



Early detection of Chagas disease is the key to preventing long-term health problems. If you suspect you have been bitten by a kissing bug, check with a doctor. Blood tests and microscopic examination can be used to diagnose Chagas disease.

Acute Chagas

This stage begins shortly after *T. cruzi* infects the body. It is often asymptomatic and typically lasts about two months. Around 70% of infected individuals recover during this phase.

Antiparasitic treatment is most effective during this stage. If treated early, the disease does not progress.

Possible symptoms:

- Headache
- Body aches
- Fever
- Fatigue
- Swelling
- Digestive issues

Chronic Chagas

This stage can occur decades after infection.
When left untreated, 30% of people will progress to this stage.

T. cruzi is present in the heart, digestive system and nervous system. It interferes with day-to-day bodily functions and can be fatal.

Symptoms:

- **Irregular or rapid heart rate**
- **Chest pain**
- **Enlarged heart, esophagus, or colon**
- **Chronic constipation**

Antiparasitic medications can no longer cure the disease, but they can slow its progress.

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