



ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER Q&A

(updated April 2008)

What is Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is a disease caused by a bacterium that is transmitted to humans by the bite of an infected tick (most commonly the American dog tick in Georgia). RMSF is the most severe and most frequently reported rickettsial illness in the United States, and is the most commonly reported tick-borne disease in Georgia.

Who gets RMSF?

Infection with RMSF is directly related to exposure to tick-infested habitats, and cases are most commonly reported among males, Caucasians, and children. However, anyone who is bitten by an infected tick can get RMSF.

How is RMSF spread?

RMSF is spread by the bite of an infected tick or by contamination of breaks in the skin or mucus membranes with crushed tissue or feces from ticks, which may occur when removing ticks from pets. Person-to-person spread of RMSF does not occur.

What are the symptoms of RMSF?

RMSF is characterized by a sudden onset of moderate to high fever (which can last for two or three weeks), severe headache, fatigue, deep muscle pain, chills and rash. The rash begins on the legs or arms, may include the soles of the feet or palms of the hands, and may spread rapidly to the trunk or rest of the body.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms usually appear within two weeks after the bite of an infected tick.

Does past infection with RMSF make a person immune?

One attack probably provides permanent immunity.

What is the treatment for RMSF?

Antibiotics like doxycycline are generally effective in treating the disease.

What can be done to prevent the spread of RMSF?

Limiting exposure to ticks is the best way to prevent tick-borne disease. When spending time outdoors in places where contact with ticks may occur, take the following precautions:

- Wear light-colored clothing so that crawling ticks can be easily seen.
- Wear pants and long sleeves to reduce skin exposure to ticks.
- Tuck pants into socks and shirts into pants to prevent ticks from crawling up pants legs.
- Apply insect repellent containing DEET to exposed skin, and permethrin to clothing.
- After spending time outdoors, thoroughly inspect your body for crawling or attached ticks. Pay particular attention to the head and scalp, as ticks may be hidden in hair.
- Due to the nature of American dog ticks, local populations may be effectively controlled with applications of pesticides to vegetation along trails; mowing grass frequently in yards and outside fences also helps to reduce tick populations.



How should a tick be removed?

To remove an attached tick, grasp with fine-tipped tweezers as close to the skin surface as possible, and pull upward and out with a firm, steady pressure. If tweezers are not available, use fingers shielded with tissue paper or rubber gloves. Do not handle with bare hands. Do not use petroleum jelly, fire, or other home remedies; these methods may actually increase the risk of infection. Be careful not to squeeze, crush, or puncture the tick's body, which may contain infectious fluids. After removing the tick, thoroughly disinfect the bite area and wash hands. Consult with a physician if there is concern about incomplete tick removal.

Where can I get additional information about RMSF?

Additional information for healthcare providers can be found on our website at

<http://www.health.state.ga.us/epi/vbd/tick.asp>, or you may contact the Georgia Division of Public Health, Epidemiology Section, by email at gaepinfo@dhr.state.ga.us. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Rocky Mountain spotted fever website is located at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rmsf/index.htm>.