

BABESIOSIS



Babesiosis is a tickborne disease caused by a tiny parasite, *Babesia*, that infects red blood cells. *Babesia* are spread by the *Ixodes scapularis* tick (also called the black-legged tick or deer tick). Babesiosis is most common in the Northeastern United States and upper Midwest (including Wisconsin) and peaks during the warm months. Anyone can get babesiosis, but it is more severe in the elderly and in those who have a weakened immune system. Babesiosis can range from relatively mild to life threatening.

What causes it?

- ▶ Babesiosis is spread to humans through the bite of an infected black-legged tick. Ticks can be found in areas with woods, brush, or tall grass.
- ▶ Babesiosis is spread during the spring, summer, and fall by both adult ticks and the young nymph stage of the tick. The risk for babesiosis is highest in spring and early summer, when the nymphs are most active. People may not remember being bitten by a tick because the black-legged nymphs are very small, about the size of a poppy seed.
- ▶ It is rare, but people can also get babesiosis through blood transfusions that are contaminated with *Babesia*.

What are the signs and symptoms?

It is possible to not have any symptoms and have babesiosis. People who are elderly, have a weak immune system, do not have a spleen, or have other serious health conditions can have more severe symptoms.

Common Symptoms

- ▶ Flu-like symptoms (fever, chills, headache, body aches, loss of appetite, nausea, or fatigue)
- ▶ Anemia
- ▶ Low blood platelets
- ▶ Jaundice
- ▶ Spleen and liver enlargement

Symptoms in Severe Cases

- ▶ Difficulty breathing
- ▶ Heart attack
- ▶ Kidney failure
- ▶ Liver disease
- ▶ Altered mental status
- ▶ Death

What are the treatment options?

Antibiotics used together with certain drugs that treat malaria have been found to work well in most patients. Very severe cases may require a blood transfusion.

How can it be prevented?

Follow these steps to reduce your risk of being bitten by a tick:

- ▶ When outdoors, wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and high socks with pant cuffs tucked into the socks. Wear light-colored clothing so ticks are easier to see.
- ▶ Walk in the center of trails and avoid brushing up against shrubs and tall grass.
- ▶ Wear insect repellent with 20-30% DEET or use 0.5% permethrin on clothing. Follow directions on manufacturer's label.
- ▶ Do tick checks on yourself and others after coming in from outside and promptly remove any ticks.
- ▶ Take a shower after coming in from outside to remove insect repellent and any ticks on the body.
- ▶ Put clothing worn outside in dryer on high for at least 10 minutes to kill any ticks that still remain on clothing.

HOW TO REMOVE A TICK:



Use tweezers to remove the tick. Grip the tick by its mouthparts, as close to the skin as possible. Pull straight up. Wash the area with soap and water.

BUREAU OF COMMUNICABLE DISEASES

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/dph/bcd.htm> | decomisc@dhhs.wi.gov

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