Frequently asked questions about

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF)

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

What is Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever?
Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) is a bacterial infection that causes fever, muscle aches and a rash. RMSF is a serious illness that can be fatal in the first eight days of symptoms if not treated correctly, even in previously healthy people. The progression of the disease varies greatly. Patients who are treated early may recover quickly on outpatient medication, while those who experience a more severe course may require intravenous antibiotics, prolonged hospitalization or intensive care.

How do people get RMSF?
People get RMSF through the bite of an infected tick. The longer the tick stays attached to the skin, the greater the chance of infection. Several hours of attachment are usually necessary for the infection to start. RMSF is not contagious from person to person.

What are the symptoms of RMSF?
Symptoms of RMSF are usually seen within 3 to 14 days of a tick bite. But in many cases, the person who develops the infection does not remember being bitten by a tick.

Symptoms include:
- Rash
- Sudden onset of moderate to high fever
- Abdominal pain (may mimic appendicitis or other causes of acute abdominal pain)
- Muscle pain
- Severe headache
- Eyes may become red
- Vomiting
- Lack of appetite
- Fatigue

The rash that makes RMSF a ‘spotted’ fever may begin anytime between 1 to 10 days after the fever and headache start, but it most often appears in the second to fifth day. The rash looks like small red spots or blotches that begin on the wrists, ankles, palms and soles. It spreads to the arms and legs, toward the trunk, but usually skips the face. As the RMSF infection progresses, the original red spots may change in appearance to look more like bruises or bloody patches under the skin.

How is RMSF diagnosed?
Health care providers diagnose RMSF by observing the symptoms and asking about possible tick exposure. If a health care provider suspects RMSF, samples of the patient’s blood should be examined.
What is the treatment for RMSF?
Antibiotics are effective against RMSF and typically are taken until at least 3 to 5 days after the fever has passed (usually about 7 to 10 days in all). If there are complications, treatment may last longer. Since it frequently takes many days for blood tests to show positive results, treatment usually begins before test results are available. (NOTE: It is very important to finish all prescribed antibiotics even if you begin to feel better, unless otherwise directed by your health care provider.)

Can people with RMSF pass the illness to others?
RMSF is spread only through the bite of an infected tick. Infected persons cannot pass the disease to other people.

How can RMSF be prevented?
You can reduce your risk by taking these actions to avoid tick bites or to safely remove a tick if you are bitten:

- Avoid wooded areas with dense shrubs and leaf litter, where ticks like to hide. Make your yard less attractive to ticks by mowing lawns and trimming trees.
- Wear solid, light-colored clothing. This will make it easier to find a tick on your clothes.
- Tuck your pants into your socks and wear a long-sleeved shirt. This will help prevent a tick from attaching to your skin.
- Use insect repellents. There are two types of repellents effective for ticks. Repellents that contain DEET (20% to 30%) can be used on clothing and exposed skin. The other type of repellent contains permethrin and should ONLY be used on clothing. Always read and follow label directions carefully. Also, use tick prevention products on your pets.
- Check yourself and your pets for ticks frequently when you are in tick-infested areas. Check again after returning and again before going to bed. Don’t overlook some of ticks’ favorite hiding places – on the scalp, behind the ears, under the arms, on the ankles, and in the groin.
- Bathe or shower as soon as possible after coming indoors (preferably within two hours) to wash off and more easily find ticks that are crawling on you. Ticks can get a ride indoors on your clothes. After being outdoors, dry clothing should be tumble dried in a dryer on high heat for 10 minutes to kill ticks. If the clothes are damp, additional time may be needed. If the clothes require washing first, hot water is recommended. The clothes should be warm and completely dry when finished.

What should I do if I find a tick?
To remove an attached tick, grasp with tweezers or forceps as close as possible to attachment (skin) site, and pull upward and out with a firm and steady pressure. If tweezers are not available, use fingers shielded with tissue paper or rubber gloves. Do not handle with bare hands. Be careful not to squeeze, crush or puncture the body of the tick, because it may contain infectious fluids. After removing the tick, thoroughly disinfect the bite site and wash hands. See or call health care professional if there is a concern about incomplete tick removal. It is important that a tick be removed as soon as it is discovered.

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Or call your local Health Department office at:

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