

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever

Frequently Asked Questions

What is Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) is a bacterial infection that causes fever, muscle aches and a rash.

How do people get RMSF?

People get RMSF through the bite of an infected tick. The longer a 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:

- Sudden high fever
- Chills
- Muscle aches
- Severe headache
- Eyes may become red
- Muscles may be tender to the touch
- Abdominal pain
- Nausea
- Vomiting
- Poor appetite
- Tiredness

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 on the third to fifth day. The rash looks like small red spots or blotches that begin on the wrists, ankles, palms, and soles. It spreads up the arms and legs toward the trunk, but usually skips the face. As the RMSF infection progresses, the original red spots may change 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 will 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 for 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 your 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 on yourself and your pets. There are two types of repellents effective for ticks. Repellents that contain DEET 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.
- Check yourself 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.

What should I do if I find a tick?

- If you find a tick, remove it immediately before it attaches to the skin. Do not squeeze or crush it with bare hands.
- If a tick has already attached to the skin, use tweezers to grasp it by the head (not just the body) as close to the skin as possible. Pull steadily until the tick pulls out (expect some resistance).
- Never squeeze an attached tick, burn it, or cover it with Vaseline or any other substance. Doing so could force fluid from the tick into your skin.
- After removing a tick, disinfect the bite area and tweezers with alcohol, and wash your hands with soap and hot water.

How should I dispose of a tick?

Place the tick in a sealed container or small plastic bag and put it in the trash. Do not flush ticks down the toilet because they can easily survive in the water.

Where can I get more information on RMSF?

- Your health care provider
- Your local health department
- NJ Department of Health www.nj.gov/health
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/rmsf/index.htm

This information is intended for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace consultation with a health care professional. Adapted from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

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