



Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever Fact Sheet

What is Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever?

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) is a bacterial disease that is spread by ticks. It is very common in Oklahoma. Most people with RMSF become ill between April and September.

Who gets RMSF?

Anyone can get RMSF, especially if they spend a lot of time outdoors in areas where ticks may be found.

How is RMSF spread?

People get RMSF from ticks, usually by a tick bite. Some people become ill after crushing a tick with their hands because its body fluids get into cuts or scratches. RMSF cannot be spread from person to person.

What are the symptoms of RMSF?

RMSF usually causes a sudden high fever which may last for 2-3 weeks. Fevers of 105°-106° F are common. Severe headache, rash, nausea, mental confusion, and muscle aches may also occur. The disease can progress to a serious and life-threatening illness resulting in permanent damage. This could include amputation of arms or legs, hearing loss, paralysis, or mental disability. If not treated early, RMSF can be deadly.

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How soon do symptoms appear?

The fever and headache develop in 3 to 14 days after the tick bite. Some infected persons may not have a rash.

What is the treatment for RMSF?

Doxycycline is the recommended antibiotic treatment for adults and children. Chloramphenicol is an alternative treatment for pregnant women. Individuals are more likely to avoid complications if treated within five days of developing symptoms which is why you may begin treatment before receiving conclusive test results.

Can a person get RMSF more than once?

Once you've had RMSF, you can't get it again.

How should a tick be removed?

Any tick should be removed as soon as possible. The best way is to use tweezers to grab the tick as close to the skin as possible and pull it straight out. Do not squeeze the tick's body when removing it. Do not handle ticks with bare hands. Wash your hands after removing a tick. You may want to apply an antiseptic on the bite. After removing, drown the tick in alcohol or kerosene and keep it in case illness occurs so you can show it to your doctor.

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How can RMSF be prevented?

- Don't walk barelegged in tall grass or woods where ticks may be found.
- Wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, and high socks. Tuck pants legs into socks. Wear light colored clothing so crawling ticks can be seen more easily.
- Conduct "tick checks" every two to three hours if spending a lot of time outdoors. Check all of your skin for ticks every day (you may need help to do this). The ticks are most often found on the thigh, arms, under arms, and legs. Ticks are very small, so look for new "freckles."
- Use tick repellents containing the ingredients DEET for skin applications (which can be toxic to infants if a large amount is applied) or Permethrin (on clothing). Always follow the directions on the label. These repellents can be found at the local drugstore. Wash off all repellents after going indoors.
- Remove any attached ticks immediately, using the method above.

*For further information, contact the
Oklahoma City-County Health Department
(405) 425-4437*

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