



Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF)

What is RMSF?

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) is a disease caused by bacteria that is passed to humans by tick bites from an infected tick. It occurs most often in the spring and summer when ticks are active but can occur all year long. In North Carolina, it is the most common disease transmitted by ticks.

How do I get RMSF?

RMSF is almost always the result of a bite from an infected tick. Nearly half of people who get RMSF don't know that they have been bitten by a tick but will have symptoms of illness.

What are symptoms of RMSF?

The symptoms of RMSF typically develop within 1 week of a tick bite but can take up to 2 weeks to appear.

- Typical symptoms include fever, headache, muscle pain and sometimes vomiting. Some early symptoms (such as fever and muscle pain) are similar to influenza-like illness.
- A rash may also develop but is often absent in the first few days, and in some patients, never develops.
- Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever can be a severe or even fatal illness if not treated in the first few days of symptoms.

Limit exposure to ticks

The best prevention is to limit exposure to ticks and tick bites.

- Avoid areas between fields or lawns and woods that have grasses or small shrubs that are prime locations for ticks.
- Wear light-colored clothing (preferably with long sleeves and pants legs), which allows you to see ticks that are crawling on your clothing.

- Tuck your pants legs into your socks so that ticks cannot crawl up the inside of your pants legs. Tuck shirts into your pants so ticks can't get under your shirt.
- Applying repellents such as DEET can make it harder for ticks to attach. Repellents containing permethrin can be sprayed on boots and clothing, and will last for several days.

Repellents containing DEET can be applied to the skin, but will last only a few hours before another application is necessary. Always follow label directions on repellents, and use with caution on children to avoid adverse reactions.

Finding and removing a tick

If you are bitten by a tick, quick removal of the tick reduces the chance of infection. After outdoor activities, check the whole body for ticks, especially near neck, ears and hair. Remove any tick you find on your body. Ticks may also be carried into the household on clothing and pets and attach later, so both should be examined carefully to find ticks.

To remove a tick:

- Use fine-tipped tweezers and protect your fingers with a tissue, paper towel, or latex gloves. Avoid removing ticks with your bare hands.
- Grasp the tick with the tweezers as close to the skin surface as possible and pull upward with steady, even pressure. Do not twist or jerk the tick; this may cause the mouthparts to break off and remain in the skin.
- Wash the bite area well with soap and water. Also wash your hands.

IMPORTANT: Write down the date of tick removal. If you develop symptoms, this could be important information to share with your doctor.

