
Understanding Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever

Rocky Mountain spotted fever is a bacterial infection that can be spread through tick bites. It's a serious illness, but it can be cured with medicine if caught early. Despite its name, Rocky Mountain spotted fever can affect people anywhere in the U.S. It can also affect people in other parts of North, Central, and South America.

What causes Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

Rocky Mountain spotted fever is caused by bacteria called *Rickettsia rickettsii*. These bacteria can be carried by certain kinds of ticks. People can get Rocky Mountain spotted fever after being bitten by an infected tick.

What are the symptoms of Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

Symptoms often appear within 3 to 12 days after bite by an infected tick. They may include:

- Fever
- Nonitchy rash
- Headache or confusion
- Muscle and joint pain
- Nausea with or without vomiting
- Abdominal (belly) pain and appetite loss (more often seen in children)

Rash is a very common symptom of Rocky Mountain spotted fever, but some people who are infected may not have a rash at all. If the rash does appear, this is often within a few days. The rash appears as small, flat, red spots on the ankles and wrists. Later it may spread to the neck, face, torso, and to the palms of the hands and soles of the feet. With time, the rash may get worse, and appear as red or purple blotches.

How is Rocky Mountain spotted fever treated?

Rocky Mountain spotted fever is treated with antibiotics. These medicines can kill the bacteria and clear the infection. Be sure to take any antibiotics you're prescribed exactly as directed and until all of the medicine is gone. Don't stop taking the medicine if the symptoms go away. If your symptoms are severe, you may need to be treated in the hospital.

What are the possible complications of Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

If not treated early enough, Rocky Mountain spotted fever can damage the blood vessels in the body. This can lead to serious problems, such as:

- Bleeding and blood clots
- Damage to internal organs, such as the brain, heart, lungs, and kidneys
- Tissue death in fingers, toes, or limbs. This may need amputation to treat.
- Death

How can I prevent Rocky Mountain spotted fever?

To help reduce the risk for Rocky Mountain spotted fever, follow these tips:

- Wear long-sleeved shirts and long pants when outdoors. This is especially important when ticks are most active in the area you are in. This is often, from April through October.
- Use tick repellent on your clothing or skin. This can help prevent tick bites.
- Check your skin for ticks, especially after hiking through grassy or wooded areas. If a tick is found, remove it completely, including the head. Disinfect the skin afterward, wash your hands, and contact your healthcare provider.
- If you have a pet that is allowed to go outdoors, be sure to check it regularly for ticks. Remove any that are found.

When should I call my healthcare provider?

Rocky Mountain spotted fever should always be treated by a healthcare provider. Call your healthcare provider right away if you have any of these symptoms after a tick bite:

- Fever
- Nonitchy rash
- Headache or confusion
- Muscle and joint pain
- Nausea with or without vomiting
- Abdominal (belly) pain and appetite loss (more often seen in children)