

Reducing the Risk of Transfusion-transmitted Chagas Disease

On February 9, 2009 Canadian Blood Services introduced donor risk questions to the Record of Donation (RD) to screen for donors who may be at increased risk of Chagas disease. As part of the strategy, the organization began testing blood donations of those donors who are found to be at higher risk on May 17, 2010. This will not only enhance the safety of Canada's blood system and maintain international standards; it will allow the organization to collect data on the prevalence of Chagas Disease among Canadian blood donors who may be at risk.

The level of risk to Canada's blood system is considered to be extremely low. While Chagas disease is rare in North America, it is even rarer in Canada. Still, two of the eight North American transfusion-transmitted cases occurred in Canada in 1989 and 2000, which is why Canadian Blood Services is introducing risk reduction measures.

Chagas disease is spread by the triatomine bug – or 'kissing bug' – and is endemic to Central America, South America, and Mexico, where an estimated 8 million to 11 million people are infected. The bugs are typically found in houses made from materials such as mud, adobe, straw, and palm thatch. Chagas disease is spread by a bite from the bug which carries the parasite. The only ways that infection is (rarely) passed from person to person is from mother to baby in utero, or from transfusion of contaminated blood products or an organ transplant from an infected donor.

Short-term travellers to endemic countries are not at particular risk. At greatest risk are people who were born there or who lived in rural areas in housing of materials such as mud, adobe, straw and palm thatch.

Most people do not know they were infected, but young children may develop flu-like illness and swelling around the bite. Approximately one third of infected people develop medical problems 20 to 30 years after infection.

Should you be found to be at higher risk as a result of the screening questions; your donation is still valuable. We can safely use your blood donation to produce life-saving red blood cells and plasma protein products. In some locations, at-risk donors may also donate "source plasma" for fractionation. Unfortunately, at-risk donors cannot make platelet donations due to the higher risk posed by this blood component. If you test positive for Chagas Disease, unfortunately you will be no longer able to donate any blood product. You and your physician will receive information on Chagas Disease and how to get diagnostic testing and further follow-up.

For more information on eligibility, please consult a nurse at one of our clinics,
or call 1 888 2 DONATE.
