

Reducing the risk of transfusion-transmitted Chagas disease

On February 9, 2009 Canadian Blood Services introduced questions to the Record of Donation (RD) to screen for donors who may be at risk of Chagas disease. As part of the strategy, we will be testing blood units of those who are found to be at risk as of May 17, 2010.

This will not only ensure the safety of Canada's blood system, and maintain international standards, but will allow us to collect data on the prevalence of Chagas disease among blood donors who may be at risk.

Chagas disease is caused by a protozoan parasite and is spread by the triatomine bug – or “kissing bug” – which 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. The disease is spread by a bite from the bug which carries the parasite. The only ways that infection is 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.

The level of risk to Canada's blood system is considered to be extremely low. While Chagas disease is rare in North America, two of the eight North American transfusion-transmitted cases occurred in Canada in 1989 and 2000, which is why Canadian Blood Services introduced risk reduction measures such as screening and testing for Chagas.

Short-term travellers to endemic countries are not at 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.

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 parts of your blood donation to produce life-saving products.