

EHRlichiosis

What is ehrlichiosis?

Ehrlichiosis (“air-lick-ee-oh-sus”) is a tick-borne disease of white blood cells caused by very small bacteria. The bacteria invade white blood cells called “monocytes” and so ehrlichiosis is also called human monocytic ehrlichiosis (HME).

How common is ehrlichiosis?

Ehrlichiosis is far less common in California than in other parts of the country. Of the approximately 1,000 cases identified in the United States (U.S.), only three cases have been confirmed in California. Most cases of HME occur in the south central U.S.

How is ehrlichiosis transmitted?

The bacteria that cause ehrlichiosis are carried by certain kinds of ticks and can be transmitted to a person when a tick bites them. In the south central U.S., the lone star tick (*Amblyoma americanum*) is known to carry and transmit the agent of ehrlichiosis. The tick vector in California has not been identified.

What are the symptoms of ehrlichiosis?

Most individuals infected with the bacteria that cause ehrlichiosis experience no or mild symptoms. When symptoms occur, they resemble influenza, with fever, headache, fatigue, muscle aches, and nausea. Some individuals may also have vomiting, cough, or a rash. More severe illness may occur in some patients, particularly elderly persons or those with weakened immune systems. The disease is rarely fatal.

How is ehrlichiosis treated?

Ehrlichiosis can be successfully treated with antibiotics. Persons with ehrlichiosis generally begin to feel better within one to two days of starting antibiotic treatment.

How do I know if I have ehrlichiosis?

If you experience flu-like symptoms within two to three weeks after receiving a tick bite, or after having been in an area where ticks are prevalent, consult your health care provider. Several different blood tests are available to your physician to help determine whether your illness is ehrlichiosis.

How can I prevent ehrlichiosis?

Taking appropriate precautions to avoid tick bites can reduce the risk of infection with ehrlichiosis, as well as other diseases transmitted by ticks. If possible, avoid areas where ticks are known to occur. When in these areas, wear light-colored long pants and long sleeve shirts. Insecticides with pyrethrin can be applied to clothing to further deter ticks from attaching. When outdoor activities are completed, thoroughly examine yourself and promptly remove any ticks that may be attached.

Where can I find more information on ehrlichiosis?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has information available at their website <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvrd/ehrlichia/index.htm>.