FACT SHEET: ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER (RMSF)

May 2025

WHAT IS ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER?

Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF) is a serious bacterial illness spread by the bite of an infected tick. RMSF is transmitted by several tick species including the American dog tick, brown dog tick, and Rocky Mountain wood tick.

WHO CAN GET ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER?

Anyone can be infected with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, and individuals who live close to or spend time in wooded areas and locations with brush and long grass are more prone to tick bites. While RMSF is found all across the contiguous United States, over 60% of cases are reported in Arkansas, Missouri, North Carolina, Oklahoma, and Tennessee.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER?

Symptoms of Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever begins 3-12 days after exposure and can occur in stages. In addition to fever and headache, symptoms of early illness (1-4 days after exposure) include:

- Rash
- Gastrointestinal symptoms (abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, anorexia)
- Body aches
- Swelling around the eyes and on the back of hands

Late illness, beginning from day 5, can consist of altered mental status, respiratory compromise, necrosis, and multiorgan system damage. People with G6PD deficiency, children under the age of 10, and people who receive delayed treatment are at higher risk of severe illness.

HOW IS ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER SPREAD?

RMSF is carried by several tick species, including the American dog tick, Brown dog tick, and Rocky Mountain wood tick.

IS A PERSON WITH ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER CONTAGIOUS?

No, a person who has Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) cannot infect others and is not contagious.

HOW IS ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER TREATED AND IS THERE A VACCINE?

RMSF has the potential to be fatal. Doxycycline administered early on can avert serious disease and death. All ages of adults and children are permitted to use doxycycline. There is currently no vaccine for RMSF.

CAN ROCKY MOUNTAIN SPOTTED FEVER BE PREVENTED?

The best way to prevent Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever is to avoid tick bites, which can be done by:

- Using EPA-registered tick repellents when walking through areas that may contain ticks.
- Wearing light-colored socks, long pants, and long-sleeved shirts. Tuck pants into socks.
- Conducting a full-body check for ticks with a mirror after spending time outdoors and removing attached ticks from your body, clothing, and pets quickly with fine-tipped tweezers. Following removal, clean the bite area with soap and water.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about Rocky Mountain spotted fever and other related health topics can be found at cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.

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