

# Chagas disease

## Information for pregnant women and birthing people

This leaflet provides information about Chagas disease, how you can get it, and how you can be screened and treated for it. If you have any more questions, please do not hesitate to speak to your midwife.

### What is Chagas disease?

Chagas disease is caused by infection with a parasite called *Trypanosoma cruzi*. It affects around 7 million people worldwide. The parasite is found throughout Mexico, Central and South America, and the disease affects people from these countries, particularly those who live or have lived in rural areas. The insect that spreads the disease is not found in the Caribbean Islands or outside Latin America.



Once a person has the infection, they can remain infected for decades, often with no signs or symptoms of illness, unaware of their infection. London has a large Latin American population. The total number of people with Chagas disease in London is not known, but it is thought that there may be several thousand. Most of these people do not realise that they are at risk and so might never have been tested.

### How do you get Chagas disease?

In Latin America, Chagas disease is spread by insects called triatomine bugs (also known locally as 'vinchuca' or 'chirimacha'). They live in cracks in walls and in thatched roofs and usually bite at night. They are also known as the 'kissing bugs' because they tend to bite people's faces.

During pregnancy, if the mother is infected, there is also a 5 to 10% chance of the parasite being passed to the baby through the placenta. This is called congenital infection.

### What are the symptoms?

Immediately after becoming infected, a small number of people experience a mild illness with fever which gets better by itself. Most people have no symptoms at all and so do not know that they are infected. The infection can then remain silent, and most people experience no illness during their lifetime.

However, one in three people can develop problems – with either their heart or their gut or both. This can happen after years or decades, which is why detection and treatment of infection is important.

Symptoms can include breathlessness, ankle swelling, dizziness or collapse. Problems with digestion, such as difficulty swallowing or constipation, can also occur. If you suffer from any of these symptoms during your pregnancy, please inform your midwife.

## **How will I know if I am infected?**

The only way to know whether you are infected with Chagas disease is by having a blood test. If you are pregnant and you, or your mother, were born in Latin America, you will be offered a blood test by your midwife at King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust when you book your pregnancy.

If you have family or friends who are concerned about whether they have Chagas, blood tests can be organised through GPs or the UK Chagas Hub's community screening events.

## **What should I do?**

If you are pregnant, and if you or your mother were born in Latin America, we recommend that you are tested for Chagas disease, even if you have been tested before.

Many people are not aware that they have the disease, but if you are infected it can cause harm in the future, and you can pass it to your baby through the placenta. Of course, it is up to you to choose whether you want to have the blood test. If you would like to have the test, your midwife can arrange it.

If you already know that you have Chagas disease or if you screen positive for Chagas when we test you, we will refer you to our Infectious Diseases clinic at King's where we can assess you further and make a care plan, including treatment after your baby has been born.

We will also offer to screen your baby when they are born (this involves 4 blood tests over several months). If your baby is positive, the treatment is free and well-tolerated and the disease can be completely cured.

## **How is Chagas disease treated?**

In the UK we treat Chagas disease with either benznidazole or nifurtimox which is taken daily for up to 60 days. Side effects are usually mild and get better by themselves.

Your doctor will give you more information before you start treatment. You will be closely monitored so that any problems can be dealt with early.

## **Further reading**

[The UK Chagas Hub](#) has resources on their website and social media platforms.

## **Who to contact**

If you have questions speak to your midwife who can refer you to the Infectious Diseases team at King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust.

## MyChart

Our MyChart app and website lets you securely access parts of your health record with us, giving you more control over your care. To sign up or for help, call us on **020 3299 4618** or email [kings.mychart@nhs.net](mailto:kings.mychart@nhs.net). Visit [www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart](http://www.kch.nhs.uk/mychart) to find out more.

## Sharing your information

King's College Hospital NHS Foundation Trust has partnered with Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trust through the King's Health Partners Academic Health Sciences Centre. We are working together to give our patients the best possible care, so you might find we invite you for appointments at Guy's or St Thomas' hospitals. King's College Hospital and Guy's and St Thomas' NHS Foundation Trusts share an electronic patient record system, which means information about your health record can be accessed safely and securely by health and care staff at both Trusts. For more information visit [www.kch.nhs.uk](http://www.kch.nhs.uk).

## Care provided by students

We provide clinical training where our students get practical experience by treating patients. Please tell your doctor or nurse if you do not want students to be involved in your care. Your treatment will not be affected by your decision.

## PALS

The Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) is a service that offers support, information and assistance to patients, relatives and visitors. They can also provide help and advice if you have a concern or complaint that staff have not been able to resolve for you. They can also pass on praise or thanks to our teams.

Tel: **020 3299 4618**

Email: [kings.pals@nhs.net](mailto:kings.pals@nhs.net)

**If you would like the information in this leaflet in a different language or format, please contact our Interpreting and Accessible Communication Support on 020 3299 4618 or email [kings.access@nhs.net](mailto:kings.access@nhs.net)**

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