What is Tick-Borne Relapsing Fever?

Relapsing Fever is a disease characterized by relapsing or recurring episodes of fever, often accompanied by headache, muscle and joint aches, and nausea.

How does someone get this disease?

It is caused by several species of spiral-shaped bacteria that are transmitted to humans through the bite of infected soft ticks. Most cases occur in the summer months and are associated in particular with sleeping in rustic cabins in mountainous areas of the western United States. Ticks usually feed on small animals such as squirrels, mice, chipmunks, or rabbits. The ticks live in rodent nests under flooring and between walls. If these rodents are scarce, the ticks will take a meal from other warm-blooded mammals, to include humans.

Who is the most likely to get this disease?

Anyone of any age may develop relapsing fever. You should know that contracting this disease is relatively uncommon.

What are the symptoms?

Symptoms usually develop within seven days after being bitten. Symptoms may include sudden high fever with chills, sweats, headache and body aches. Other possible symptoms include nausea, vomiting, loss of appetite, dry cough, inability to tolerate bright lights, jaundice, rash, neck pain, eye pain, confusion and dizziness.

Is this disease contagious?

Relapsing fever can’t be transmitted from person to person, except in the case of pregnant women who sometimes transmit the infection to their fetus.

What are the best prevention tools?

Avoid sleeping in rodent-infested buildings.

Limit tick bites by using insect repellent containing DEET or permethrin (applied to clothing).

Rodent-proof buildings in areas where the disease is known to occur.

Identify and remove any rodent nesting material from walls, ceilings and floors.

In combination with removing the rodent material, fumigate the building with preparations containing pyrethrins and permethrins. More than one treatment is often needed to effectively rid the building of the vectors, the soft-ticks.

(Always follow product instructions, and consider consulting a licensed pest control specialist).

How is this disease diagnosed and treated?

When a person has a fever, it is often possible to see the spirochetes in a sample of blood taken by your healthcare provider. Antibody tests are also available, but these are not useful in the early stages of the disease. Although symptoms usually resolve on their own, treating relapsing fever with antibiotics will make the symptoms subside much more quickly.