

HEALTH & SCIENCE

Parasite threatens U.S. blood supply

A parasitic infection common in Latin America is a top threat to the U.S. blood system, experts say. The infection, Chagas disease, still is rare in North America. There have been two cases in Canada transmitted by blood transfusion since 1986, said Lorna Tessier, a spokeswoman for Canadian Blood Services. Chagas, a microscopic parasite, is common in Mexico, Central America and South America. Insects called Reduviids, also known as assassin bugs, live in thatched houses and drop down on humans while they sleep. They find their way into people's mouths, suck their blood, and leave behind a drop of excrement laden with the parasite. Infected people initially suffer from fever and swollen glands, but the disease can lie dormant for up to 30 years. It eventually weakens organs — including the heart — causing them to rupture. There is no effective treatment or vaccine, and there is currently no way to screen blood for the parasite that causes Chagas.

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