



Chikungunya Virus

Frequently Asked Questions about Chikungunya

What is chikungunya?

Chikungunya is a disease that is caused by a virus transmitted through the bite of an infected *Aedes* mosquito. It is a new disease in the Caribbean: the first cases were detected in St Martin in December 2013, and it has now spread throughout the region.

Where did chikungunya come from?

The chikungunya virus comes from Africa, where it was first identified in the country of Tanzania in the 1950s. Since then, it has spread to many other parts of the world where the *Aedes* mosquito lives. The name “chikungunya” comes from the Makonde language, and means “that which bends,” describing the bent-over appearance of people who experience joint pain.

What are the symptoms of chikungunya?

People who are bitten by a mosquito carrying chikungunya may start to feel sick after 2 – 12 days. The first symptom is usually a high fever that starts suddenly. Severe joint pain in hands, wrists, knees and ankles is also common. Other reported symptoms include joint swelling, headache, back pain, body aches, rash, nausea and vomiting. Rarely, you can become infected with chikungunya and not have symptoms at all.

The symptoms of chikungunya usually go away within 7-10 days. However, one of the most serious aspects of the disease is that in a small proportion of people, joint pain can come and go for months or even years.

Who is at risk?

Anyone who has not been previously infected with chikungunya can get it. Because it is a new disease in the Caribbean, most people do not

have immunity to the virus, which means that it can be spread quickly to a lot of people.

Some people are at risk of having more serious disease if they do get infected with chikungunya. These include older adults (over 45 years), people with arthritis, and people with underlying medical conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or heart disease.

Can I die from chikungunya?

Deaths from chikungunya are very rare: people who have serious pre-existing health conditions, such as high blood pressure, diabetes, or heart disease are most at risk.

Can I get chikungunya more than once?

You can only be infected with chikungunya once since your body’s immune system builds a response that protects you from being infected again. This is different from dengue fever where you can be infected multiple times because of different types of the virus.

However, sometimes people with chikungunya will feel better after their initial illness, only to have joint pain and swelling return later. These symptoms are not caused by a second chikungunya infection, but by your body reacting to the first infection.

What about pregnant women? Can the unborn baby get chikungunya if the mother gets sick?

It is possible for pregnant women with chikungunya to transmit the infection to their babies; the risk of this is highest if the mother is sick at the time the baby is born. Studies in other parts of the world where there have been chikungunya outbreaks show that mothers who

have chikungunya earlier in their pregnancies have babies who are just as healthy as mothers who did not have chikungunya.

How is chikungunya treated?

There is no specific medicine to treat chikungunya. Your doctor may advise rest and drinking plenty of liquids, and will recommend appropriate medication for pain.

In some cases, recovery from chikungunya can take up to a year or even more, with persistent joint pain. For persistent joint pain, your doctor may recommend anti-inflammatory medicine to be taken long-term.

There is no vaccine to protect against chikungunya at this time.

My doctor told me that I have chikungunya, but I didn't get a laboratory test. Why not?

Now that the chikungunya virus is all over the Caribbean, doctors have been told not to test every case. Your doctor can tell you if you have chikungunya based on the symptoms that you have. Because there is no specific medicine to treat chikungunya, the laboratory test would likely not affect the way your doctor treats your illness.

However, there are some situations where your doctor may feel that a test for chikungunya should be done; for example, if you are very ill. In these cases, your doctor or another health care professional will decide what is the best laboratory test to use, as not all of the tests work equally well at different stages of the illness.

What can I do to protect myself and my family?

The only way to prevent infection is by preventing mosquito bites. This can be done by 1) reducing the number of mosquitoes in the environment, and 2) protecting yourself from being bitten.

Support local mosquito-control efforts by spending 10 minutes 2-3 times a week checking for water in flower pots, water storage barrels or

other open containers near where you live. Mosquitoes can lay their eggs in these containers, so they should be drained or turned upside down. Clean up any garbage in the area outside your house. Ask your neighbours to take part in these activities as well.

To prevent mosquitoes from entering your house, install screens on the windows and doors, and keep them shut as much as possible. Indoors, use fans or air-conditioning to deter mosquitoes from biting, or consider using mosquito netting over the bed.

When possible, wear long pants, socks and long-sleeved shirts when you are outside and mosquitoes are biting. Use insect repellents containing DEET, picaridin, IR3535, oil of lemon, eucalyptus or para-menthane-diol products. Always follow the label instructions when using insect repellents.

Can I get chikungunya from anything other than a mosquito bite?

There is lots of scientific proof that mosquitoes carry the Chikungunya virus and that being bitten by an infected mosquito is the only way to become infected. In theory, it might be possible to get Chikungunya through a blood transfusion from an infected person, but this would be extremely unlikely.

You *cannot* get Chikungunya by eating chicken or other foods, by touching or sharing food with someone who has Chikungunya, or by being bitten by other insects.

I am planning a visit to the Caribbean – how can I avoid getting Chikungunya?

As a tourist to the Caribbean, you should take the same measures as the general population to prevent being bitten by mosquitoes: keep the doors and windows to your room closed unless they are screened; use fans or air-conditioning to deter mosquitoes; wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants and socks; and use insect repellents.

There are rumors that some food, plant and vitamin supplements can prevent or treat chikungunya. Is that true?

While a healthy diet and proper nutrition are generally helpful in fighting disease, there is no scientific evidence that any food, plant, or vitamin supplement is effective in preventing or treating chikungunya infection.

Your health care provider can recommend medications to help relieve symptoms of chikungunya.

What is the difference between chikungunya and dengue?

Both chikungunya and dengue can be transmitted by the same *Aedes* mosquito, but the two diseases are caused by different viruses.

The diseases have similar symptoms, but there are some differences. With chikungunya, you are more likely to have joint pain, which can sometimes last for a long time. With dengue infection, fever tends to last longer, and dengue is more likely than chikungunya to lead to serious illness or death.

Can I tell if I have been bitten by an infected mosquito?

You can't tell if a mosquito is carrying chikungunya, so avoid ALL mosquito bites!

The *Aedes* mosquitoes live in and around people's houses, and bite most often in the early morning and late afternoon, so take extra precautions around those times. Unlike other mosquitoes, *Aedes* do not make much noise, so you may not notice that you are being bitten until you feel itching on your feet or ankles.

Why do I hear differing reports of how many chikungunya cases there are in the Caribbean?

The number of chikungunya infections officially reported likely only reflects a small proportion of the infections actually occurring. This is because not everyone who gets infected will go to their doctor and, of those that do visit their doctor, not everyone will be tested.

For this reason, knowing that chikungunya is in your community and taking preventive steps is more important than counting the number of people who have been infected.