



Devastating New Infection From Ticks

- Melissa Breyer
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Anyone familiar with the effects of Lyme disease knows how life-changing it can be. Now a new potentially devastating infection caused by tick bites is beginning to spread in the Lower Hudson Valley, coastal areas of the Northeast, and elsewhere, according to an article in [The New York Times](#). The malaria-like illness, called babesiosis, is a result from infection with *Babesia microti*, a parasite that lives in red blood cells and is carried by deer ticks.

A recent report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention cited in the Times says that there were six cases of babesiosis in the Lower Hudson Valley in 2001 and 119 cases in 2008, a 20-fold increase. In areas where Lyme disease is endemic, like coastal Rhode Island, Massachusetts, Connecticut and Long Island, babesiosis also is becoming very common, said Dr. Peter Krause, senior research scientist at the Yale School of Public Health. Babesiosis also is spreading slowly into other regions where it did not exist before, like the Upper Midwest.

Babesiosis can be fatal, particularly in people with compromised immune systems—and since there is no test to screen for it, there is a particular threat that it is tainting the blood supply. Hopefully the Food and Drug Administration will be licensing a test soon, but as of now the only way to screen a potential blood donor is by merely asking donors if they are infected. Babesiosis is already the most frequently reported infection transmitted through transfusion in the United States, responsible for at least 12 deaths.

Many people who are infected show no symptoms, while others experience mild to moderate flu-like symptoms that last for a few days or as long as six months. “But some people get so sick that they wind up hospitalized, put into an intensive care unit, or even dying,” said Dr. Gary Wormser, chief of infectious diseases at Westchester Medical Center in New York. The infection is not accompanied by the red flag of a bulls-eye rash like that which often accompanies Lyme disease.

The symptoms include include fever, sweats, chills, headache, fatigue, and muscle aches and pains. A diagnosis can be confirmed through blood testing.

If not caught and treated early, babesiosis can lead to such complications as kidney, lung or heart failure.