



Chagas: Is tropical disease really the new AIDS?

By *Dylan Stableford*

Chagas, a tropical disease spread by insects, is causing some fresh concern following an editorial—published earlier this week in a medical journal—that called it "the new AIDS of the Americas."

More than 8 million people have been infected by Chagas, most of them in Latin and Central America. But more than 300,000 live in the United States.

The editorial, published by the Public Library of Science's Neglected Tropical Diseases, said the spread of the disease is reminiscent of the early years of HIV.

"There are a number of striking similarities between people living with Chagas disease and people living with HIV/AIDS," the authors wrote, "particularly for those with HIV/AIDS who contracted the disease in the first two decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic."

Both diseases disproportionately affect people living in poverty, both are chronic conditions requiring prolonged, expensive treatment, and as with patients in the first two decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, "most patients with Chagas disease do not have access to health care facilities."

Unlike HIV, Chagas is not a sexually-transmitted disease: it's "caused by parasites transmitted to humans by blood-sucking insects," as the New York Times put it.

"It likes to bite you on the face," CNN reported. "It's called the kissing bug. When it ingests your blood, it excretes the parasite at the same time. When you wake up and scratch the itch, the parasite moves into the wound and you're infected."

"Gaaah," Cassie Murdoch wrote on Jezebel.com, summing up the sentiment of everyone who read the journal's report.

Chagas, also known as American trypanosomiasis, kills about 20,000 people per year, the journal said.

And while just 20 percent of those infected with Chagas develop a life-threatening form of the disease, Chagas is "hard or impossible to cure," the Times reports:

The disease can be transmitted from mother to child or by blood transfusion. About a quarter of its victims eventually will develop enlarged hearts or intestines, which can fail or burst, causing sudden death. Treatment involves harsh drugs taken for up to three months and works only if the disease is caught early.

"The problem is once the heart symptoms start, which is the most dreaded complication—the Chagas cardiomyopathy—the medicines no longer work very well," Dr. Peter Hotez, a researcher at Baylor College of Medicine and one of the editorial's authors, told CNN. "Problem No. 2: the medicines are extremely toxic."

And 11 percent of pregnant women in Latin America are infected with Chagas, the journal said.