

### **‘Kissing Bug’ Disease is in Louisiana. How Worried Should Locals Be?**

Last month, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention declared Chagas disease an endemic in the U.S., estimating 300,000 Americans unknowingly live with the deadly virus.

While the new classification may sound alarming, Louisiana experts say the parasite that causes the disease and the insects that transmit it have been around for years, with the first case recorded in the state in 2006, according to the Louisiana Department of Public Health.

The disease is caused by the parasite *Trypanosoma cruzi*, which spreads through insects known as kissing bugs. Not all kissing bugs are infected, but the CDC estimates more than 50% carry the disease. The bugs can infect humans when their feces enters the body through a bite wound. Kissing bugs have been traced to 32 U.S. states, including Louisiana.

The status of the disease is actually a good thing, according to Kristen Healy, an expert in Medical Entomology and Public Health Entomology at LSU’s AgCenter. With increased recognition of the disease, early detection is more likely, which can be lifesaving, she said.

“The bugs and animal hosts and pathogens have been here for decades. But there has been more research and community awareness in recent years,” said Healy.

In the U.S., the risk is lower than in Latin America because the species found here are not likely to infest homes or directly transmit the parasite, according to Healy.

Still, The CDC’s classification has drawn national attention and caused alarm. This could be because the disease has some serious side effects including chest pains, body aches, vomiting and sudden death if left untreated.

Annette Moulay, a social ecologist, posted a TikTok video condemning other social media users after she noticed people spreading online fear. She said while she understands the danger of the disease, inciting panic can do more harm than good.

“I think educating people in a way that has genuine good intentions instead of using fear to gain views is the first step,” she said.

When Moulay was younger, she said she noticed an itchy bug bite on her arm, and after cleaning her room she found a big, black bug under her bed. When she brought it to a lab to be identified, the doctors confirmed it was a kissing bug. Since it wasn’t a major concern in California at the time, where she is from, nothing was done.

After Moulay read the CDC paper, she said she emailed her doctor, and plans to test to see if the bug carried Chagas.

“This is awareness that is vital. I never would have thought about that interaction with the bug again if I hadn’t read that paper, but I wanted to show people that I’m fine, too, and to not worry,” Moulay said.

In Louisiana hunters are at the greatest risk of contracting the disease since the insect lives entirely in wooded areas, according to Sam Jameson, a researcher at Tulane’s department of Tropical Medicine.

“Hunters or those cleaning any non-avian species should be cautious, wear gloves, and take the risk of parasite infection during field dressing or cleaning animals seriously,” said Jameson.

He said kissing bugs found toward the end of summer also have a higher percentage of carrying the disease.

Tulane University has led most of the state's research on Chagas disease. Jameson said Tulane scientists have long known that Louisiana experiences occasional human cases, but that they remain, "exceptionally rare by any public health standard."

The recent CDC announcement, he said, gives legitimacy to decades of research, but Tulane's department doesn't want to spread panic, just awareness.

Some unsuspecting blood donors may even find out they carry the disease. According to the Vitalent blood donation center in Baton Rouge, the FDA has required all blood donations to be tested for Chagas disease since 2007.

Erin Cloherty, director of Public Health Programs at Loyola University New Orleans, said there's been lots of confusion about the disease as more people have learned about it.

"There's a lot of other bugs out there that get mistaken for kissing bugs," she said.

According to Healy, Louisiana is home to only one species of kissing bug. They can be identified by their cone-shaped head, long thin legs and flat body with orange or red lines running down it.

A huge misconception about the disease, Cloherty said, is that while it's not contagious, it can be transmitted congenitally from mother to child during pregnancy or birth. She says it would be beneficial if testing for Chagas was promoted more to immigrants and expectant mothers who immigrated from countries where Chagas is more prevalent.

If you suspect you've found a kissing bug, LSU AgCenter advises the public to take a picture and submit it to them. You should not directly handle the kissing bug or smash it as their bodies can contain the parasite.

###

#### Sources

Kristen Healy – [khealy@agcenter.lsu.edu](mailto:khealy@agcenter.lsu.edu)

Erin Cloherty – [ercloher@loyno.edu](mailto:ercloher@loyno.edu)

Sam Jameson – [sbishop@tulane.edu](mailto:sbishop@tulane.edu)

Annette Moulay - (704)450-6877