

What to Know About Alpha-Gal Syndrome, the Red-Meat Allergy Linked to Tick Bites

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Love red meat? You have another reason to avoid ticks this summer.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention on Thursday said alpha-gal syndrome, a [red-meat allergy](#) linked to tick bites, is an emerging public-health problem.

The agency said it identified 110,000 suspected cases of AGS in the U.S. between 2010 and 2022, but said the true number of cases could be as high as 450,000, in part because many healthcare providers aren't aware of the syndrome.

Several [tick-borne diseases](#) have been on the rise in the U.S., thanks in part to expanding deer populations and a warming, more tick-hospitable climate. Reports to the CDC of tick-borne diseases, such as Lyme disease, more than doubled in the U.S. between 2004 and 2019.

What is alpha-gal syndrome?

AGS, believed to be primarily associated with lone star tick bites in the U.S., is a potentially life-threatening allergic condition that people can experience after eating food that contains alpha-gal, a sugar found in mammal products, the CDC said.

Also known as the red-meat allergy or the tick-bite-meat allergy, it can cause symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, hives and difficulty breathing.

“Alpha-gal syndrome is an important emerging public health problem, with potentially severe health impacts that can last a lifetime for some patients,” Dr. Ann Carpenter, an epidemiologist involved with the CDC’s research on AGS, said in a statement.

Where in the U.S. is AGS typically found?

The Southern, Midwestern and mid-Atlantic regions of the U.S. have reported the most cases, the CDC said. The highest numbers of suspected cases were found in New York’s Suffolk County, on Long Island, and Virginia’s Bedford County, east of Roanoke.

The CDC said the cases were predominantly found in areas where the lone star tick has been reported. But cases were also seen in Minnesota and Wisconsin, which aren’t known to have those ticks.

What are the symptoms of AGS?

Symptoms are wide-ranging, and can include hives, nausea, heartburn, difficulty breathing, swelling, dizziness and severe stomach pain, the CDC said. The symptoms often occur two to six hours after eating food or being exposed to another product that contains alpha-gal.

AGS can be severe and life-threatening at times. There is no cure.

What foods can cause AGS?

Alpha-gal is found in meat including pork, beef, rabbit, lamb and venison. It can also be found in products such as gelatin, cow's milk, milk products and even some pharmaceuticals, according to the CDC. It isn't found in fish, reptiles or birds.

Patients with AGS won't necessarily be allergic to every product containing alpha-gal, and may not have an allergic reaction every time they are exposed to the sugar, the CDC said.

How do you get diagnosed with AGS?

AGS can only be diagnosed through a test and clinical exam by an allergist or other healthcare provider. A doctor may also recommend allergy skin testing.

The CDC cautioned that AGS is relatively unknown in the medical community. In a CDC study released Thursday, researchers said that of 1,500 surveyed medical professionals, more than 40% hadn't heard of AGS and more than a third were "not too confident" in their ability to diagnose patients with it.

How can I avoid getting AGS?

Avoiding the grassy and wooded areas where ticks are found is the best way to prevent AGS and any other tick-borne disease. If you do venture out, [using insect repellent](#) that is registered with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and contains ingredients such as DEET or picaridin can help ward off critters. Staying in the center of trails during hikes helps, too.

Make sure to check your clothes for ticks when you return home. Clothes can be dried on high heat to kill ticks.

Try to shower within two hours of coming home. When showering, check your body for ticks and remove them immediately if you find any. You should remove the ticks with tweezers and wash both the bite and your hands with soap and water or rubbing alcohol.

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