

**PAHO**



Pan American  
Health  
Organization



World Health  
Organization  
REGIONAL OFFICE FOR THE  
Americas

News release

## Less than 10% of people with Chagas receive a diagnosis

*PAHO calls for first level of care to be strengthened to ensure early detection and treatment of disease that affects more than 6 million people globally, the vast majority in Latin America.*



**Washington, DC, 13 April 2023 (PAHO)** – Most people with Chagas, a disease that is largely asymptomatic, are not diagnosed or receive medical care until they develop a chronic infection. On World Chagas Disease Day (April 14), the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) calls for first level of care to be strengthened to improve the detection and treatment of this neglected disease.

*Time to integrate Chagas disease into primary health care* is the theme of this

year's World Day, highlighting the low detection rates and frequent barriers to accessing adequate medical care.

“Chagas is a disease that few know about, although it affects millions of people”, PAHO Director Dr. Jarbas Barbosa said. “I call on governments, health personnel and community workers to make additional efforts to work together and focus attention on most vulnerable populations, so that we can soon eliminate Chagas as a public health problem.”

Chagas affects more than 6 million people worldwide, most of them in Latin America. However, due to increased population mobility, the disease is increasingly detected in other countries and continents. Around 30,000 new cases and 10,000 deaths are reported in the Latin American region each year.

Chagas disease is caused by the *T. cruzi* parasite. It is mainly transmitted through contact with a vector insect known as a kissing bug. It can also be transmitted via blood transfusion or organ transplantation, during pregnancy and labor, and through eating contaminated food. Chagas disease is almost 100% curable if detected and treated early.

“With Chagas detection rates so low, treatment is arriving too late,” said Dr. Massimo Ghidinelli, interim Director of PAHO's Department of Prevention, Control, and Elimination of Communicable Diseases. “We need to involve the community and support primary care professionals with training and critical supplies to manage the disease,” he said.

If detected in time, Chagas can be cured or treated. Without long-term treatment, up to 30% of patients can develop irreversible complications to the nervous system, digestive system and heart.

With the support of PAHO, since 1990 countries of the region have made progress in controlling Chagas. This includes measures to control the vector, application of universal screening in blood banks and in pregnant women and improved housing conditions.

However, given the continued circulation of the vector and the silent nature of the disease, Chagas continues to be endemic in 21 countries of the Americas and is one of more than [30 diseases and conditions that PAHO and countries seek to eliminate by 2030](#).

## **For a Chagas-free childhood**

It is estimated that around 1.1 million women of childbearing age are infected with the *T. cruzi* parasite in Latin America. Each year, 9,000 children contract Chagas through mother-to-child transmission.

This week, PAHO organized a [webinar](#) in which experts discussed experiences and strategies to end congenital Chagas disease.

To end mother-to-child transmission, PAHO recommends universal Chagas screening for pregnant women, and testing of newborns to determine serological status. The Organization also recommends treating positive mothers and babies after delivery.

Chagas disease is named after Carlos Chagas, a Brazilian doctor and researcher who discovered the disease in 1909. World Chagas Disease Day was established by the World Health Assembly and first celebrated in 2020. Since then, it has been celebrated every 14 April – the day Carlos Chagas diagnosed the first human case of the disease in 1909.

## **Chagas in the Americas in numbers**

- It is estimated that between 6 and 7 million people are infected worldwide, most of them in Latin America.
- 75 million people are at risk of contracting the disease.
- In the Americas, 30,000 new cases of Chagas and 10,000 deaths are reported each year.
- 9,000 new cases per year in Latin America are due to mother-to-child transmission.
- Chagas disease is endemic in 21 countries of the Americas.
- 18 countries in the region have interrupted home vector transmission at the national level or in some portion of their territories.
- The Chagas detection rate is less than 10%.
- Up to 30% of patients suffer from cardiac disorders and up to 10% present digestive, neurological, or mixed disorders.
- The disease is 100% curable if drugs are administered at the beginning of the infection in the acute stage, even in cases of congenital transmission.

### **Links**

World Chagas Disease Day 2023

<https://www.paho.org/en/campaigns/world-chagas-disease-day-2023>

Disease Elimination Initiative: Towards Healthier Generations  
<https://www.paho.org/en/disease-free-generations>

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The Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) works with the countries of the Americas to improve the health and quality of life of its population. Founded in 1902, it is the world's oldest international public health agency. It serves as the Regional Office of WHO for the Americas and is the specialized health agency of the Inter-American system.