What is the treatment for Chagas disease?

In the UK we treat Chagas disease with a drug called benznidazole. This is taken daily for 60 days.

Benznidazole can have side effects. These are usually mild and get better by themselves. They include:
- Rashes
- Nerve problems
- Poor appetite and weight loss
- Nausea and vomiting
- Headache or dizziness
- Problems sleeping

If your doctor wishes to prescribe benznidazole you will be given more information about possible side effects before you start treatment. You will also be closely monitored during your treatment so that any problems can be dealt with early.

What is the Chagas Hub?

The UK Chagas Hub was founded in 2017. It is a new collaboration bringing together healthcare professionals, researchers, advocates, and members of the Latin American community to tackle Chagas disease in the United Kingdom.

The Hub is focused on three main activities:
(1) Raising awareness of Chagas disease amongst the Latin American community in the UK and the healthcare professionals working with them
(2) Improving clinical services for those with, or at risk of Chagas disease. We work closely with the Hospital for Tropical Diseases which provides diagnostic and treatment services in a dedicated Chagas clinic, the only one of its kind in the UK
(3) Conducting research into epidemiology and clinical manifestations of the disease in the UK

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Thank you for taking the time to read this leaflet
What is Chagas disease?
Chagas disease is caused by infection with a parasite called *Trypanosoma cruzi*. It affects around 7 million people worldwide. The parasite is found throughout Central and South America and the disease affects people from these countries, particularly those who live or have lived in rural areas. Rates are highest in Bolivia where up to 70% of people are affected in some areas.

The insect that spreads the disease is not found outside Latin America. However, once a person has the infection they remain infected for decades, often with no signs or symptoms of illness. As there are now large numbers of people who were born or grew up in Latin America and who are now living in other countries around the world, there are many people with Chagas disease who may be unaware of their infection.

London has a large Latin American population. The total number of people with Chagas disease in London is not known, but it is thought that there may several thousand. Most of these people do not realise that they are at risk and so might never have been tested.

How do people catch Chagas disease?
In Latin America Chagas disease is spread by insects called triatomine bugs (also known locally as ‘vinchuca’ or ‘chirimacha’). They live in cracks in walls and in thatched roofs and usually bite at night. Less commonly, Chagas disease can be spread by drinking contaminated fruit juice, or by blood transfusion or organ transplantation. All blood products and donated organs are tested in the UK to reduce this risk. In a small proportion of pregnancies the parasite can be passed to the baby by infected mothers. This is called congenital infection.

What are the symptoms?
Immediately after becoming infected, a small number of people experience a mild illness with fever which gets better by itself. Most people have no symptoms at all and do not know that they are infected.

The infection can then remain silent and for the majority of people this causes no illness during their lifetime. However, one in three people can develop problems – with either their heart or their digestive system or both - after years or decades, and this is why detection and treatment of infection is important. The heart rhythm and pump strength might be affected so symptoms can include breathlessness, ankle swelling, dizziness or collapse. Problems with the digestion such as difficulty swallowing or constipation can also occur.

How would I know if I am infected?
The only way to know for sure whether you are infected is by having a blood test. Your doctor (GP) can arrange this.

Why is it important to get tested?
Although you might not feel unwell, if you have Chagas disease and do not get it treated this can lead to problems with the heart or digestive system later in life. Once these have developed, it is not usually possible to cure them (although you can receive treatments to manage the symptoms). In general doctors prefer to treat the infection before any problems have developed, if possible.

If you are a woman who is pregnant or may become pregnant in the future, there is a small risk that you may pass the infection to your baby during pregnancy. This can be prevented by being tested and treated before conception. If you are found to be infected whilst pregnant your baby can be tested, treated and cured.

What happens if my test is positive?
If your test result is positive, you will be referred to the Hospital for Tropical Diseases in central London where you will see a doctor who specialises in treating tropical infections like Chagas disease. He/she will explain more about the disease and how it affects you. Our dedicated Chagas clinic takes place on the last Wednesday afternoon of each month, and we have Spanish speaking staff and/or interpreters available.

Here, you will be offered treatment. We will also keep a close eye on you for any problems that might occur as a result of the treatment. You will also have some tests to look at your heart, and will be referred to a specialist if needed. We will also offer to test any of your relatives who might also be affected.