

Sylvatic Typhus Fact Sheet

1. **What is Sylvatic Typhus disease?** - Sylvatic Typhus (ST) is an infectious disease which, in the eastern United States, is associated with close contact with flying squirrels or their nests. Symptoms include high fever along with chills, headache, muscle aches, rash, confusion, and/or sensitivity of the eyes to light. Mild infections may occur.
2. **What causes ST?** - ST is caused by the bacteria *Rickettsia prowazekii*. This bacteria is also the cause of epidemic or louse-borne typhus usually seen in the settings of social disruption such as war, famine, or disasters. In contrast, ST can affect anyone who has contact with flying squirrels or who has flying squirrels in their environment. ST occurs predominately in the eastern United States and tends to produce milder disease than epidemic or louse-borne typhus. It is not known if the flying squirrel strain of *R. prowazekii* is weaker than the louse-borne strain or if another factor such as mode of transmission or nutritional status is responsible for the difference in disease severity.
3. **How does ST spread?** - In the United States, ST is associated with contact with flying squirrels, but the exact way it spreads from the squirrel is not known. It is thought that the fleas or lice on the flying squirrel either directly bite humans, or contaminated droppings from these insects transmit the disease. The disease usually occurs within one or two weeks of exposure. The risk for infection appears to be highest among persons with prolonged exposure to settings with flying squirrels. ST is not known to spread from person to person.
4. **How common is ST?** – ST disease is very rare. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) documented only 41 cases from 1976 to 2002. However, it is likely that many people are infected and recover without ever being diagnosed.
5. **How is ST diagnosed?** - ST is diagnosed by a blood test. By the second week of illness, the body's immune response to infection can usually be detected through antibody tests. Blood must be drawn early in the course of illness and again later in order to compare changing antibody levels. Most clinical labs do not offer specific testing for this organism. Specimens may be sent to the Pennsylvania Department of Health's Bureau of Laboratories when ST is suspected. Treatment should not wait for lab results. All suspected cases should be reported to the local health department or county state health center.
6. **Is there a treatment for ST?** - ST can be treated with antibiotics, particularly doxycycline, along with other medications to control the symptoms. Most cases respond quickly to appropriate antibiotics and some cases have resolved with no treatment. No ST deaths have been reported in the United States since it was originally recognized in 1976, although the illness can be severe when treatment is delayed, and often results in hospitalization.
7. **Can ST be prevented?** - Flying squirrels should be treated with respect and observed only from afar. No one should feed or encourage human and flying squirrel interactions. Cabins and residential areas should be secured against flying squirrels and other



wildlife. Entryways can be screened with metal flashing or hardware cloth. Cabins and homes with flying squirrel nests or flea infestation should be properly treated for fleas and lice by pest control professionals and exterminators using appropriate personal protection.

This fact sheet provides general information. Please contact your physician and/or veterinarian for specific clinical information related to you or your animal.