What is Chagas Disease?

- Chagas disease or American trypanosomiasis is a parasitic disease transmitted by triatomine bugs known as kissing bugs. The disease can be asymptomatic for years but can severely affect the colon and heart.
- Chagas disease is present in Central and South America countries, especially in rural areas, in dwellings with thatched roofs or with cracked or poorly constructed walls.
- The insect stays in crevices in the walls, hiding during the day and becoming active at night, when it bites people.

Transmission

- The kissing bug defecates after biting. The *Trypanosoma cruzi* parasite, which causes the disease, is found in the insect’s feces.
- Transmission occurs when the person instinctively scratches and introduces feces from an infected insect into the bite wound. This is how the parasites enter the bloodstream. They can also be introduced through mucous membranes in the eyes, nose, or mouth.
- Chagas disease can also be transmitted through blood transfusions, organ transplants, from mother to child during pregnancy, and through food contaminated with feces of disease-transmitting insects.

Symptoms and treatment

- The first symptoms of the infection are fever, swelling, cough, rash, abdominal pain, and headache.
- In 70% of cases, infected people show no symptoms. However, 30% of those affected can have irreversible and chronic consequences to their nervous system, digestive system, and heart, eventually causing death.
- Chagas disease can be diagnosed with a blood test, thus preventing transmission. Once the disease has been detected, follow the treatment prescribed by the health provider.
- Detection and treatment of girls and women of childbearing age, together with detection of babies born to infected mothers is essential to stopping transplacental congenital transmission of the infection.
- This disease can be cured, if treatment (benznidazole and nifurtimox) is given shortly after infection or is administered to children. In the chronic phase of the disease in adults, an antiparasitic treatment can improve the evolution of the condition.

Prevention

- The following are ways to prevent bites by the insect that transmits Chagas disease:
  - Insecticide fumigation of houses and surrounding areas.
  - Good hygiene practices in the preparation, transportation, storage, and consumption of food.
  - Use of mosquito nets.
  - Blood tests and early treatment. There is no vaccine to prevent Chagas disease.