

Alpha-gal syndrome in Florida

Background

Alpha-gal syndrome (AGS) is a non-infectious, vector-borne disease that is characterized by an IgE-mediated allergy to the sugar galactose- α -1,3-galactose (alpha-gal), which is found in all mammals except some primates.¹ It is caused by tick bites.² In the U.S., lone star ticks are responsible for the majority of cases.³

People with AGS react to a broad range of alpha-gal exposures. These include foods derived from mammals or made with mammal-derived ingredients such as beef, pork, lamb, venison, dairy products, gelatin, and many other foods.³⁻⁵ They also include drugs and medical products, such as monoclonal antibodies, heparin, bioprosthetic heart valves, some vaccines, antivenom, medication in gelatin capsules, and many other medical products.³⁻⁵ Over 75% of people with AGS report reacting to a medication, and about 50% report that they have experienced anaphylactic reactions to a health product.⁶ Many people with AGS also react to personal care and household products with mammal-derived ingredients.³ Farmers and ranchers may have severe reactions to livestock exposures, forcing some to abandon their livelihood.³⁷

Alpha-gal reactions are often severe and can be fatal.^{3,4,7} 60-75% of people with AGS experience anaphylactic reactions, a higher percentage than for any other food allergy—even peanut allergy.^{8,9,10,36} In areas of high prevalence, reactions to alpha-gal can be the number one cause of anaphylaxis in adults and adolescents, accounting for a third of all cases, more than all other food allergies combined.¹¹ Studies in Virginia suggest that AGS may be responsible for up to 25% of both IBS-like symptoms and rheumatological issues in high prevalence areas.^{12,13} Concerningly, preliminary research in both the U.S. and Australia found that people who are sensitized to alpha-gal, even if they do not develop allergic reactions, may be at increased risk of cardiovascular disease.^{14,15} The NIH is currently funding a follow-up study of this issue.¹⁶

Due to growing lone star tick populations, the number of cases of AGS is increasing at an alarming rate.^{17,18} In a July 2023 report, the CDC recognized AGS as a growing clinical and public health concern.¹⁸ They reported that between 2010 and 2022, more than 110,000 suspected cases of AGS were identified and estimated that up to 450,000 Americans may be affected, making AGS the 10th most common food allergy.^{18,19} Yet alarmingly, 78% of physicians know little to nothing about AGS, and only 5% feel very confident in diagnosing and managing it.²⁰

Alpha-gal syndrome in Florida: a growing threat

Alpha-gal syndrome cases are not distributed evenly across the U.S. They are concentrated in areas where lone star ticks are found.¹⁸ In Florida, the lone star is the most common human-biting tick in Florida.²¹ The CDC and state-level surveillance data show that lone star ticks are found throughout most of Florida.^{22,23} Currently, northern and central Florida are most impacted, but lone star ticks are widespread in the state.^{18, 23--24}

Due to lack of physician awareness, alpha-gal syndrome is massively underdiagnosed.^{18,19} And due to lack of reporting requirements, we don't know how many Floridians have been diagnosed with AGS. However, based on data from a study of military recruits, we can estimate that 5% Floridians have the allergic antibody to alpha-gal, and tens of thousands likely have full-blown alpha-gal syndrome.²⁵⁻²⁸

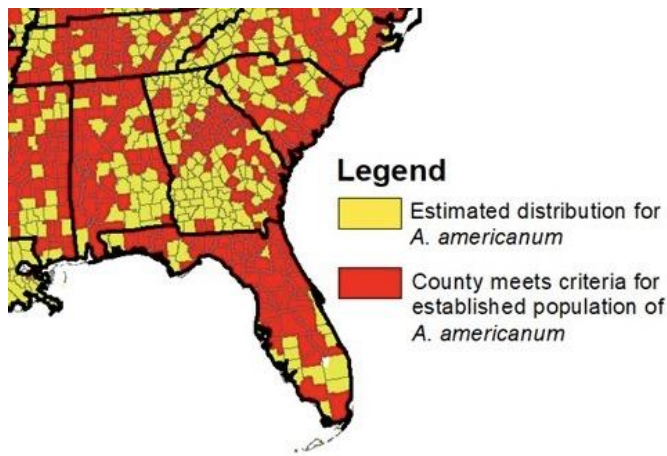


Fig. 1. CDC lone star tick surveillance map²³



Fig. 2. Geographic distribution of suspected alpha-gal syndrome cases - United States, January 2017-December 2022.¹⁸

A call to action

In their July 2023 report, the CDC stated that due to the current lack of surveillance, the true prevalence of AGS is largely unknown.¹⁸ They identified a “critical need” for state and local health authorities to initiate surveillance and encourages them to do so.^{18,29} The CDC recently laid the groundwork to enable and encourage states to make AGS reporting mandatory, publishing a National Notifiable Diseases Surveillance System case definition for alpha-gal syndrome (AGS) and created an Alpha-gal Syndrome Case Report Form.^{30,31} In September 2023, Arkansas became the first state to make AGS a mandatory, reportable health condition.³² Since then, ten other states have followed suit: Delaware, Iowa, Kentucky, Nebraska, North Dakota, Oregon, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia.

Given the unknown and likely significant impact of AGS on Floridians with AGS, their families, and state healthcare systems, the rapid implementation of improved AGS surveillance should be a top priority for the state.

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