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### Articles

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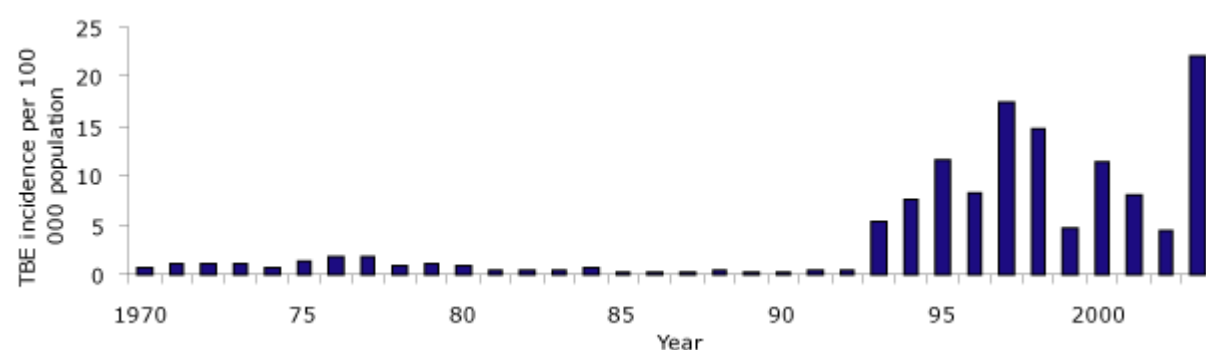
### Tickborne encephalitis in Lithuania

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In 2003, the epidemiology of tickborne encephalitis (TBE) in Lithuania was very unusual. The incidence rate (763 cases, 22 per 100 000 population) was double the average incidence over the last 10 years, and was the highest annual rate recorded since notification began at the end of the 1960s. This rate was also the highest of all the Baltic countries in 2003. Four lethal cases of TBE were notified in 2003. TBE is normally transmitted by a tick bite, but in 2003, 22 cases of TBE (4 clusters), were acquired by consuming unpasteurised goat's milk, a well recognised transmission route.

From 1993, the TBE incidence rate in Lithuania suddenly increased to >5 per 100 000 population, a 10-fold increase compared with the previous two decades. There was a further 3-fold increase in 1997/98, followed by a decrease to nearer the 1993 level, before the dramatic increase last year (Figure). One explanation for the high incidence in 2003 may be that there were higher numbers of ticks this particular year.

**Figure.** Notified TBE incidence in Lithuania (1970-2003). [Source: SE Randolph (personal communication, 2004) and International Working Group on TBE (<http://www.tbe-info.com/epidemiology/index.html>)]



TBE has a strict seasonal pattern, probably due largely to seasonal patterns of tick activity and human visits to the forests. In 2003 most TBE cases were registered in September and October, as usual. The highest incidences of TBE, about 80% of all notified cases, are recorded every year in the northern and central part of the country, mainly in three counties: Kaunas, Panevezys and Siauliai. In 2003, the incidence rate in these areas was the same, but incidence rates were much higher in many other counties. Eight districts out of 44 reported a 2-5 times higher incidence rate than the average incidence in Lithuania. The highest incidence rate was in Panevezys, at about 100 per 100 000 population.

In Lithuania, TBE affects 1.4 times as many males as females. People from rural areas are 1.7 times more affected than people living in urban areas. This has stayed constant over the last 10 years. About 40% of all cases of TBE were in retired and unemployed people, who constitute a particular risk group. This number has stayed relatively constant over the past few years. One reason could be that these people are more likely to collect mushrooms and berries, which can serve as an additional source of income.

TBE incidence is about 2-3 times higher in adults than in children. Typically, 20% of all cases of TBE in Lithuania are in people over 60. In 2003, people aged 40-49 also made up nearly 20% and the increased incidence rate affected all age groups.

### Vaccination

Despite TBE being a very big problem in Lithuania, vaccine coverage is too low to control the disease: about 20 000 doses of TBE vaccine are given each year, according to official statistics. Vaccination is recommended but the government does not provide financial assistance for this, and people have to pay the full costs themselves. Some employers provide vaccination for employees such as forest workers, who, through their occupation, have a higher risk of TBE.

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