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TICK-BORNE PATHOGENS IN ARMENIA: A REVIEW OF IXODID TICKS AND ASSOCIATED PATHOGENS SINCE 2000

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Tick-borne diseases represent an increasing threat to human and animal health worldwide, yet their epidemiological characteristics remain insufficiently studied in many regions, including Armenia. This review summarizes published data on tick-borne pathogens in Armenia since 2000, with a focus on ixodid (hard) ticks as the primary vectors of epidemiological importance. Available studies demonstrate the circulation of a diverse range of pathogens, including viral, bacterial, and protozoan agents. Their presence across different ecological zones indicates the existence of active natural foci and highlights the role of Armenia's environmental diversity in the circulation of pathogens. However, available data remain fragmented and geographically limited, preventing a comprehensive understanding of the distribution and epidemiological significance of these pathogens. Further studies, based on standardized methodologies, expanded geographic coverage, and integrated surveillance approaches, are necessary to enhance knowledge of tick-borne infections and support effective public and veterinary health strategies in Armenia.

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Introduction. Ticks are obligate hematophagous ectoparasites with a wide range of terrestrial and volant hosts. Due to their considerable medical and veterinary importance, ticks act as vectors for a variety of viral, bacterial, and protozoan pathogens. Approximately 1000 tick species have been described worldwide, all classified within the order Ixodida and distributed among three extant families: Argasidae, Ixodidae, and Nuttalliellidae [1, 2].

Situated in the Transcaucasian Region, Armenia, is characterized by pronounced landscape heterogeneity and diverse ecological conditions, including arid, semi-arid, and humid zones that foster rich biodiversity. The country's climatic variability and heterogeneous landscapes support the survival and distribution of tick populations and contribute to the transmission of associated pathogens [3, 4]. Studies of tick-borne diseases in Armenia date back to the 1930s, when piroplasmosis in cattle and its tick vectors were already being investigated [5]. Recent entomological studies have identified a diverse tick fauna in Armenia, represented by multiple

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genera, including *Ixodes*, *Dermacentor*, *Hyalomma*, *Rhipicephalus*, and *Haemaphysalis*, with more than 30 ixodid tick species recorded across the country [4, 6].

Molecular and ecological studies have documented additional tick species and host associations, as well as a wide array of bacterial and parasitic agents, including members of the genera *Borrelia*, *Anaplasma*, *Ehrlichia*, *Rickettsia*, *Francisella*, *Babesia*, and *Theileria*. These findings highlight considerable pathogen diversity and frequent co-infections within tick populations [7]. Furthermore, the circulation of Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus has been demonstrated by the detection of viral antigen in ixodid ticks [8] and subsequently confirmed through molecular identification of viral RNA in tick populations [4]. Despite the growing number of studies on tick fauna and associated pathogens in Armenia, the available data remain fragmented and inconsistent. Most studies have focused on specific pathogens, restricted geographic regions or particular host species [4, 8, 9, 10], leading to the absence of a comprehensive overview of tick-borne pathogens in the country. This makes it difficult to fully understand pathogen diversity and distribution and highlights the need for a critical evaluation of existing data to provide a coherent overview of tick-borne pathogens in Armenia.

The aim of this study is to summarize published data on tick-borne pathogens in Armenia since 2000 with particular emphasis on pathogen diversity, distribution, and current research gaps, focusing on ixodid (hard) ticks as the primary vectors of epidemiological importance.

Experimental Part.

***Epidemiological Importance of Ticks as Vectors*.** Vector-borne diseases in general represent a major global public health burden, accounting for approximately 17% of all communicable diseases and causing more than 700 000 deaths annually with over 80% of the world's population at risk of at least one such disease. These diseases are increasingly expanding beyond their traditional geographic ranges due to factors such as climate change, urbanization, and global travel, leading to the emergence of new transmission foci in previously unaffected regions [11].

Ticks are among the most important vectors of infectious diseases worldwide, second only to mosquitoes in their impact on human health [12]. They are obligate hematophagous ectoparasites capable of transmitting a wide variety of pathogens, including viruses, bacteria, and protozoa, during their blood-feeding process [13]. The epidemiological importance of ticks is further enhanced by their ability to harbor multiple pathogens simultaneously and to transmit co-infections to hosts [14]. Of the known tick groups, two families are of primary medical importance: the hard ticks (Ixodidae) and the soft ticks (Argasidae), both of which include species involved in pathogen transmission [15]. In recent decades, the incidence and geographic distribution of tick-borne diseases have increased significantly, driven by the expansion of tick populations and the spread of suitable habitats [14, 16]. This growing diversity and distribution of tick-borne pathogens pose an increasing threat to both human and animal health worldwide.

Against this global background, the epidemiological importance of ticks is also increasingly recognized at the regional level, including in the South Caucasus, as demonstrated by recent studies reporting diverse tick species and the circulation of multiple pathogens in Armenia [4, 7, 8]. Although the overall burden of tick-borne

diseases in Armenia remains insufficiently characterized, available evidence suggests that these infections represent an important and potentially growing public and veterinary health concern.

Tick Fauna of Armenia. In this review, we focus on hard ticks (Ixodidae), which represent the primary vectors of tick-borne pathogens in Armenia. They are the most epidemiologically significant group in the country, acting as vectors of numerous pathogens affecting both humans and animals. According to available studies, the tick fauna of Armenia is diverse and includes more than 30 species distributed across various ecological zones (see Table). The most commonly reported genera include *Ixodes*, *Dermacentor*, *Hyalomma*, *Rhipicephalus*, and *Haemaphysalis*, which are widely distributed and associated with a broad range of vertebrate hosts [7, 17]. The composition and distribution of tick species vary depending on environmental conditions, host availability, and landscape characteristics, reflecting the ecological complexity of the region [7]. This diversity of tick vectors creates favorable conditions for the circulation and maintenance of multiple tick-borne pathogens in Armenia.

Ixodid tick species reported in Armenia since 2000, identified using morphological methods (species names standardized to current taxonomy)

N	Tick species	Research year	References
1	*Dermacentor marginatus* (Sulzer, 1776)	2009–2012	[9]
			[18]
		2015–2017	[17]
		2016	[8]
			[10]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]
2	*Dermacentor niveus* (Neumann, 1897)	2021	[4]
3	*Dermacentor pictus* (Hermann, 1804)	2009–2012	[9]
			[18]
4	*Dermacentor raskemensis* (Pomerantzev, 1946)		[18]
5	*Dermacentor reticulatus* (Fabricius, 1794)	2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]
6	*Haemaphysalis caucasica* (Olenev, 1928)	2022–2024	[6]*
7	*Haemaphysalis parva* (Neumann, 1897)	2009–2012	[9]
		2022–2024	[6]*
8	*Haemaphysalis punctata* (Canestrini & Fanzago, 1878)	2015–2021	[17]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]*
9	*Hyalomma anatolicum anatolicum* (Schulze & Schlottke, 1930)	2009–2012	[9]
		2009–2012	[19]
		2021	[4]
10	*Hyalomma asiaticum* (Schülze & Schlottke, 1929)	2015–2017	[17]
		2022–2024	[6]*
11	*Hyalomma asiaticum caucasicum* (Pomerantzev, 1940)	2009–2012	[9]
			[10]
12	*Hyalomma excavatum* (Koch, 1844)		[20]
13	*Hyalomma marginatum* (Koch, 1844)		[20]
		2016	[8]
		2017	[7]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]*

14	*Ixodes laguri* (Olenev, 1929)	2022–2024	[6]*
15	Ixodes ricinus (Linnaeus, 1758)	2015–2017	[17]
		2016	[8]
		2017	[7]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]*
16	*Rhipicephalus annulatus* (Say, 1821)	2009–2012	[9]
		2009–2012	[19]
		2015–2017	[17]
		2016	[8]
			[10]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]*
17	*Rhipicephalus bursa* (Canestrini & Fanzago, 1878)	2009–2012	[9]
		2009–2012	[19]
			[20]
		2016	[8]
			[10]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]*
18	*Rhipicephalus sanguineus* (Latreille, 1806)	2016	[8]
			[10]
		2017	[7]
		2021	[4]
		2022–2024	[6]*

Note: * data from Manucharyan et al. (2025) [6] are derived from a preprint and have not yet undergone peer review.

Tick-borne Pathogens in Armenia. Available studies conducted in Armenia since 2000 have demonstrated the circulation of a diverse range of tick-borne pathogens across different ecological zones of the country. These findings reflect both the environmental heterogeneity of Armenia and the wide distribution of ixodid tick species, which together create favorable conditions for the maintenance of natural infection foci. Investigations have identified viral, bacterial, and protozoan pathogens in tick populations and animal hosts. Among them, Crimean–Congo hemorrhagic fever virus represents the most significant viral agent, while bacterial pathogens include members of the genera *Anaplasma*, *Rickettsia*, *Borrelia*, and *Francisella*. In addition, protozoan parasites such as *Babesia* and *Theileria* are widely reported, particularly in livestock-associated systems [4, 7, 8, 10]. The detection of these pathogens in different regions and host species indicates the presence of active natural foci and highlights the ongoing risk of transmission to both humans and animals. However, despite the increasing number of studies, the overall epidemiological picture remains incomplete due to differences in study design, geographic coverage, and methodological approaches.

In the following sections, tick-borne pathogens reported in Armenia are discussed according to their major taxonomic groups (viral, bacterial, and parasitic), with the analysis restricted to ixodid (hard) ticks and studies published since 2000 to reflect current epidemiological knowledge.

Tick-borne Viral Pathogens in Armenia. Tick-borne viral pathogens, particularly Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus (CCHFV), are widely distributed across the South Caucasus and neighboring regions, where they represent an important public health concern. CCHFV is a tick-borne zoonotic pathogen that causes a severe viral hemorrhagic disease in humans. The virus belongs to the genus *Orthonairovirus* within the family *Nairoviridae* and is widely distributed across Africa, Asia, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. CCHFV is primarily transmitted to humans through the bites of infected ticks, particularly those of the genus *Hyalomma*, although transmission may also occur through direct contact with the blood or tissues of infected animals or humans. The virus circulates in a tick–animal–tick cycle involving a wide range of wild and domestic vertebrate hosts, which typically remain asymptomatic [21].

In humans infection with CCHFV can lead to severe clinical manifestations, including hemorrhagic symptoms, with reported case fatality rates ranging from approximately 10% to 40% during outbreaks. The widespread distribution of the virus, combined with its high pathogenicity and the absence of widely available vaccines, makes CCHFV a significant public health concern, especially in endemic regions [21].

The first evidence of CCHFV in Armenia dates back to the 1970s, when the virus was isolated from the blood of a patient with clinically confirmed disease [22]. This remains the only laboratory-confirmed severe human case reported in the country. Following these early findings, research on CCHFV in Armenia remained limited for several decades, and no systematic investigations were conducted until more recent studies. Renewed interest in CCHFV emerged with the study by Gevorgyan et al. (2019) [8], which provided the first evidence of virus circulation in Armenia through the detection of viral antigen in ixodid tick populations. These findings were subsequently strengthened by molecular studies, which confirmed the presence of viral RNA in ticks and provided more robust evidence of active virus circulation in the country [4]. However, these studies currently represent the only available data on CCHFV circulation in Armenia.

The detection of CCHFV in tick populations in Armenia indicates the presence of active natural foci of infection and highlights the potential risk of transmission to humans and animals, particularly in regions with intensive livestock farming and high tick activity. Although only limited human cases have been documented, the confirmed circulation of the virus in vector populations suggests that CCHFV may be underrecognized in the country. Given the severity of the disease and its high case fatality rates, these findings underscore the importance of continuous surveillance, expanded epidemiological studies, and the implementation of effective monitoring strategies to better assess and mitigate the risk of CCHFV in Armenia.

Tick-borne Bacterial Pathogens in Armenia. Tick-borne bacterial pathogens, including species of the genera *Rickettsia*, *Borrelia*, *Anaplasma*, and *Francisella*, are widely reported across the South Caucasus and surrounding regions. They represent a diverse group of pathogens of significant medical and veterinary importance, responsible for a range of zoonotic infections in both humans and animals.

Tick-borne bacterial infections are often characterized by complex transmission cycles involving multiple vertebrate hosts and vector species, and several pathogens are considered emerging or re-emerging due to changes in environmental conditions and vector distribution [12, 13].

Historical data on tick-borne bacterial pathogens in Armenia are relatively limited. One of the earliest indications of their circulation was reported by Tarasevich et al. (1976) [23], who demonstrated the presence of natural foci of rickettsioses in the Armenian SSR, detecting spotted fever group rickettsiae in ixodid ticks and serological evidence of infection in both humans and animals. These findings suggested that tick-borne bacterial agents, including rickettsiae and *Coxiella burnetii*, were already established in local ecosystems. Subsequent advances in laboratory methods allowed for more detailed characterization of these pathogens [24].

Since 2000, the application of molecular and epidemiological approaches has substantially improved the detection and characterization of tick-borne bacterial pathogens in Armenia. Recent studies have confirmed the circulation of several clinically significant bacterial agents within ixodid tick populations, including members of the genera *Rickettsia*, *Anaplasma*, *Ehrlichia*, and *Borrelia*. Spotted fever group rickettsiae appear to be among the most frequently detected pathogens, while *Anaplasma phagocytophilum* has been identified as one of the most prevalent bacterial agents in ticks collected from livestock [7]. Earlier field and veterinary investigations also reported the emergence and spread of anaplasmosis in different regions of Armenia, highlighting its epidemiological significance and the role of ixodid ticks as vectors [9]. In addition, evidence of *Borrelia* circulation in Armenian tick populations has been reported in ecological and monitoring studies, indicating the presence of Lyme borreliosis foci in the region [17].

These findings collectively demonstrate that ixodid ticks in Armenia harbor a diverse assemblage of bacterial pathogens with zoonotic potential, emphasizing the importance of continued surveillance, molecular diagnostics, and comprehensive ecological studies to better understand their distribution and public health impact.

Tick-borne Protozoan Pathogens in Armenia. Tick-borne protozoan pathogens, particularly *Babesia* and *Theileria* species, are widely distributed in the South Caucasus and play a significant role in livestock health in the region. These parasites represent an important group of parasites affecting both human and animal health worldwide. They are primarily transmitted by ixodid ticks and maintained in transmission cycles involving domestic and wild vertebrate hosts. Infections caused by these organisms are of considerable veterinary importance, as they can lead to significant morbidity and economic losses in livestock populations, especially in regions where tick vectors are widely distributed [13].

Studies of tick-borne infections in Armenia date back to the early 20th century and were initially focused on hemoparasitic diseases of livestock and their tick vectors. Early work by Mamikonyan described piroplasmosis and related infections in cattle, as well as the role of ticks in their transmission [5]. Subsequent investigations expanded this knowledge by identifying specific tick species involved in pathogen transmission, including *Hyalomma marginatum*, and by examining

hemosporidian infections in farm animals [25, 26]. These early studies were primarily veterinary in scope and laid the foundation for later research on tick-borne protozoa in the region. However, for many years, investigations remained largely descriptive and lacked detailed characterization of the causative agents.

Since 2000, advances in molecular and epidemiological methods have significantly improved the detection and identification of tick-borne protozoan pathogens in Armenia. Recent studies have confirmed the circulation of several protozoan species within tick populations and animal hosts, particularly members of the genera *Babesia* and *Theileria*. These pathogens have been detected across different ecological zones of the country and are closely associated with livestock production systems and grazing practices [7, 10]. Their presence in ixodid ticks and domestic animals indicates the persistence of natural transmission cycles and ongoing exposure risk for susceptible hosts.

The widespread occurrence of protozoan pathogens in Armenia highlights their continued veterinary and economic significance. Infections caused by *Babesia* and *Theileria* species can lead to reduced productivity, increased mortality, and substantial economic losses in livestock [13]. Despite their importance, comprehensive data on their distribution, species diversity, and epidemiological patterns remain limited. Therefore, further studies integrating molecular diagnostics, ecological analysis, and long-term surveillance are essential to better understand the dynamics of tick-borne protozoan infections and to develop effective control strategies in Armenia.

Conclusion. This review summarizes current knowledge on tick-borne pathogens in Armenia since 2000, with a particular focus on ixodid ticks as the primary vectors of epidemiological importance. Available studies demonstrate that Armenia harbors a diverse range of tick-borne pathogens, including viral, bacterial, and protozoan agents. Among them, Crimean-Congo hemorrhagic fever virus represents the most significant viral pathogen, while bacterial agents such as *Rickettsia*, *Anaplasma*, *Borrelia*, and *Francisella*, as well as protozoan parasites of the genera *Babesia* and *Theileria*, are widely distributed in tick populations and animal hosts. These findings indicate the presence of active natural foci of infection and highlight the role of Armenia's diverse ecological conditions in supporting the circulation of multiple pathogens. At the same time, the available data remains limited and fragmented, with studies often restricted to specific regions, host species, or individual pathogens. Comprehensive information on pathogen distribution, prevalence, and epidemiological dynamics at the national level is still lacking. Therefore, further research based on standardized methodologies, expanded geographic coverage, and integrated approaches is essential. Continuous surveillance and multidisciplinary studies will be critical for improving our understanding of tick-borne infections in Armenia and for developing effective strategies to reduce their impact on human and animal health.

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Գ. Գ. ԳՐԻԳՈՐՅԱՆ

ՏՉԵՐԻ ՄԻՋՈՑՈՎ ՏԱՐԱԾՎՈՂ ՀԱՐՈՒՑԻՉՆԵՐԸ ՀԱՅԱՍՏԱՆՈՒՄ. IXODID ՏՉԵՐԻ ԵՎ ԴՐԱՆՑ ՀԵՏ ԿԱՊՎԱԾ ՀԱՐՈՒՑԻՉՆԵՐԻ ՎԵՐԱՆԱՅՈՒՄ 2000 ԹՎԱԿԱՆԻՑ ՍԿՍԱԾ

Տզերով փոխանցվող հիվանդությունները գնալով ավելի մեծ վտանգ են ներկայացնում ինչպես մարդկանց, այնպես էլ կենդանիների համար ողջ աշխարհում: Այնուամենայնիվ, դրանց տարածման առանձնահատկությունների մասին տվյալները շատ տարածաշրջաններում, այդ թվում՝ Հայաստանում, լիարժեք ուսումնասիրված չեն: Աշխատանքում ամփոփվել են 2000 թվականից ի վեր Հայաստանում տզերով փոխանցվող հարուցիչների վերաբերյալ հրապարակված տվյալները՝ առանձնացնելով իքսոդային (կոշտ) տզերին, որոնք ունեն համաճարակաբանական մեծ նշանակություն: Վերջին հետազոտությունները Հայաստանի տարբեր էկոլոգիական գոտիներում տզերով փոխանցվող հարուցիչների, այդ թվում՝ վիրուսների, բակտերիաների և նախակենդանիների առկայության մասին, վկայում են երկրում գոյություն ունեցող ակտիվ բնական օջախների առկայությունը, և ընդգծում Հայաստանի միջավայրային բազմազանության դերը դրանց շրջանառման հարցում: Միևնույն ժամանակ, առկա տվյալները ամբողջական չեն, հաճախ ընդգրկում են աշխարհագրորեն սահմանափակ տարածքներ, ինչը դժվարեցնում է պաթոգենների տարածվածության և համաճարակաբանական նշանակության իրատեսական գնահատումը, ուստի անհրաժեշտ են ավելի լայնածավալ և համակարգված հետազոտություններ՝ ժամանակակից ստանդարտիզացված մեթոդների կիրառմամբ և ավելի մեծ աշխարհագրական ընդգրկմամբ, ինչը կնպաստի տիզերով փոխանցվող հիվանդությունների տարածվածության ավելի հստակ պատկերի ստացմանը և թույլ կտա մշակել դրանց արդյունավետ կանխարգելման ու վերահսկման ռազմավարություններ:

Г. Г. ГРИГОРЯН

ПАТОГЕНЫ, ПЕРЕДАВАЕМЫЕ КЛЕЩАМИ В АРМЕНИИ. ОБЗОР КЛЕЩЕЙ СЕМЕЙСТВА IXODID И СВЯЗАННЫХ С НИМИ ПАТОГЕНОВ С 2000 ГОДА

Заболевания, передаваемые клещами, представляют собой возрастающую угрозу здоровью людей и животных во всем мире, однако их эпидемиологические характеристики во многих регионах, включая Армению, остаются недостаточно изученными. В данной работе обобщены опубликованные данные о возбудителях клещевых заболеваний в Армении с 2000 г. с акцентом на иксодовых (жестких) клещах как основных переносчиков эпидемиологически значимых инфекций. Имеющиеся исследования демонстрируют циркуляцию широкого спектра патогенов, включая вирусные, бактериальные и протозойные агенты, наличие которых в различных экологических зонах свидетельствует о существовании активных природных очагов и подчеркивает роль экологического разнообразия Армении в их циркуляции. Однако доступные данные остаются фрагментарными и географически ограниченными, что препятствует всестороннему пониманию распространения и эпидемиологической значимости этих патогенов. Дальнейшие исследования, основанные на стандартизированных методах, расширенном географическом охвате и интегрированных подходах к эпидемиологическому надзору, необходимы для углубления знаний о клещевых инфекциях и разработки эффективных стратегий здравоохранения среди населения и животных в Армении.