

Health

Putting ticks in the Lyme light

Targeting Lyme disease



Prevention tips

- Use a repellent with DEET on your skin, and treat clothing, socks, shoes and gear with permethrin.
- Wear light-colored clothing so ticks will be easier to spot. Tuck pants into socks, pull back hair and wear a baseball cap.
- Check daily for ticks, which hide in skin folds and hair.
- Shower soon after being in wooded or grassy areas.
- Routinely check pets for ticks. — ADP

By Andrea Downing Peck

HIKING, CAMPING AND outdoor activities are harbingers of spring for many people, but exposure to Lyme-disease-carrying deer ticks could take a bite out of your fun.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) focused a spotlight on Lyme disease in 2013 when it announced there are roughly 300,000 new cases each year, 10 times more than the 30,000 annual cases previously reported.

"Lyme disease is a major epidemic in this country," says Dr. Raphael Stricker, director of the International Lyme and Associated Diseases Society (ILADS; ilads.org). "It is a huge problem for people who spend a lot of time outdoors and are exposed to ticks."

In the Northeast and upper Midwest, people living near woods need to be on the lookout for tiny deer tick nymphs from late April through July. From October until the first snowstorm, the larger adult female deer tick, with its signature copper abdomen, is active. In California and other regions, ticks can be active year-round.

"The juvenile stage of the tick is a real problem, because they're the size of a poppy seed," says Douglas Serafin of the Greenwich Health Department in Connecticut. "They attach to the body and stay attached for three to five days. They are hard to find if they are not in an obvious place and you're not looking for them."



Forty years after the illness first was identified, in Lyme, Connecticut, Lyme disease remains a challenge for both patients and physicians. Controversy surrounds many aspects of the bacterial disease, with the Infectious Diseases Society of America and ILADS crossing swords over the reliability of diagnostic tests and treatment approaches.

"Patients need to take it upon themselves to get educated so they have all their options in front of them and realize there's not just one approach to this illness," says Dr. Steven Phillips, past president of ILADS. "There's a controversy in the medical community."

According to the CDC, 95 percent of confirmed Lyme disease cases are reported from 14 states: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia and Wisconsin. However, Lyme-disease-carrying ticks have been identified in all 50 states.

"If you live in New England, you can get exposure doing things you wouldn't normally think of as high-risk activities, like walking across the lawn," says Phillips, a Costco member.

If you are bitten by a tick in a Lyme-endemic area, quickly remove the parasite and bag it for potential testing.

"The faster you get the tick off, the better," Stricker says, but any time a tick is attached is long enough to get infected.

Early Lyme disease symptoms appear within three to 30 days and usually include a bull's-eye-shaped rash, but many people develop a solid rash or no rash. Flu-like symptoms such as headache, fever, muscle/joint aches and fatigue are also common.

"Symptoms come on fairly quickly but often resolve after a few days or weeks," Stricker says. "That's part of the problem. The disease can still be there and progress if the person isn't treated."

Even when treated with the recommended two to four weeks of antibiotics, an estimated 20 percent of people will develop chronic Lyme disease, the CDC says.

When Lyme disease reoccurs, it can cause arthritis-like symptoms as well as neurological damage, heart and eye problems, limb weakness and poor motor coordination.

Costco member Andrea Caesar, 40, contracted Lyme disease at age 11 in Rhode Island, but spent 26 years searching for an explanation of her many debilitating symptoms.

"Lyme is called the great imitator because it mimics so many other diseases. It is almost like playing Whac-A-Mole in trying to figure out what is wrong. As soon as you get the diagnosis of fibromyalgia, for example, something else pops up that isn't related to fibromyalgia," says Caesar, whose book *A Twist of Lyme: Battling a Disease That 'Doesn't Exist'* (Archway Publishing, 2013; not available at Costco) details her day-to-day struggle to live with the illness.

After dozens of doctor visits and seven false-negative Lyme tests, Caesar's health turned a corner after she sought out a "Lymeliterate" physician associated with ILADS.

"This is an ever-evolving disease in terms of our understanding of it," she says. "If you have the telltale signs of Lyme—or unexplained anything—go to an ILADS doctor, because they are not going to give up." ☐

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