

# Tick Bites & Lyme Disease

According to the Centers for Disease Control, each year approximately 300,000 people are diagnosed with Lyme Disease. The Lyme disease bacterium is spread through the bite of infected ticks, like the blacklegged tick (or deer tick) which spreads the disease in the northeastern United States. Luckily, the bacteria that causes Lyme disease is uncommon in our immediate area, but it's still important to know how to prevent tick bites, and what to do if you or someone you know is bitten.

## **How to Prevent Tick Bites**

Reducing exposure to ticks is the best defense against Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever, and other tickborne infections. While it is a good idea to take preventive measures against ticks year-round, be extra vigilant in warmer months (April-September) when ticks are most active.

There are several steps you and your family can take to prevent and control Lyme disease:

- Avoid wooded and bushy areas with high grass and leaf litter. Walk in the center of trails.
- Wear long pants and long sleeves when walking through heavy brush, tall grass, and densely wooded areas.
- Clear tall grasses and brush around homes and at the edge of lawns. Mow the lawn frequently and keep leaves raked.
- Stack wood neatly and in a dry area (discourages rodents that ticks feed on).
- Keep playground equipment, decks, and patios away from yard edges and trees and place them in a sunny location, if possible.
- Remove any old furniture, mattresses, or trash from the yard that may give ticks a place to hide.
- Check your pets for ticks regularly and apply a flea & tick preventative treatment on them. Dogs are very susceptible to tick bites and tickborne

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diseases, and can carry ticks into your home.

## **Tips on How to Check Yourself for Ticks**

Take a bath or shower as soon as possible after coming indoors (preferably within two hours) to wash off and more easily find ticks that are crawling on you.

Conduct a full-body tick check using a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body upon return from tick-infested areas. Parents should check their children for ticks under the arms, in and around the ears, inside the belly button, behind the knees, between the legs, around the waist, and especially in their hair.

Examine gear and pets. Ticks can ride into the home on clothing and pets, then attach to a person later, so carefully examine pets, coats, and backpacks.

Tumble clothes in a dryer on high heat for an hour to kill remaining ticks. (Some research suggests that shorter drying times may also be effective, particularly if the clothing is not wet.)

## **How to Remove a Tick**

If you find a tick attached to your skin, there's no need to panic. There are several tick removal devices on the market, but a plain set of fine-tipped tweezers will remove a tick quite effectively. Your goal is to remove the tick as quickly as possible, since the tick must be attached for 36-48 hours or more before the Lyme disease bacterium can be transmitted.

**Step 1:** Use fine-tipped tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin's surface as possible.

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**Step 2:** Pull upward with steady, even pressure. Don't twist or jerk the tick; this can cause the mouth-parts to break off and remain in the skin. If this happens, remove the mouth-parts with tweezers. If you are unable to remove the mouth easily with clean tweezers, leave it alone and let the skin heal.

**Step 3:** After removing the tick, thoroughly clean the bite area and your hands with rubbing alcohol, an iodine scrub, or soap and water.

Call your doctor if you have not been able to remove the entire tick. Also call if in the days following a tick bite you develop a red bull's-eye rash, flu-like symptoms, joint pain, redness, or swollen lymph nodes. Be sure to tell your doctor about your recent tick bite, when the bite occurred, and where you most likely acquired the tick. It is also important to inform your doctor of your recent travel history, in case you have traveled to an area where Lyme disease is more widespread. Call 911 if you have any signs of chest pain, heart palpitations, paralysis, severe headache, or trouble breathing.

Antibodies against Lyme disease bacteria usually take several weeks to develop, so blood tests for Lyme disease are best performed at least 6 weeks after a tick bite, if at all. Patients treated with appropriate antibiotics in the early stages of Lyme disease usually recover rapidly and completely. Antibiotics commonly used for oral treatment include doxycycline, amoxicillin, or cefuroxime axetil. Patients with certain neurological or cardiac forms of illness may require intravenous treatment with drugs such as ceftriaxone or penicillin.