

# Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

## Lyme Disease

Lyme disease is caused by a bacterium called *Borrelia*. Humans are exposed to this germ when they are bitten by the blacklegged tick, also known as a deer tick. Ticks become infected when they feed on infected animals, and can pass it to humans by biting them.

Lyme disease occurs in both adults and children. Symptoms usually begin within a few weeks after the tick bite, and include:

- fever
- fatigue
- headache
- muscle and joint pain
- skin rash with a specific look (a bull's eye)

A late form of the disease can cause more serious problems such as arthritis, facial paralysis (inability to move the face muscles), meningitis and heart infection or carditis. These complications usually occur when the disease is not detected and treated early.

Although most cases have occurred in New England and the Eastern/mid-Atlantic states in the USA, Lyme disease has also been reported in Canada. Confirming the diagnosis of Lyme disease requires special blood tests. Once the diagnosis is made, the treatment is antibiotics for up to 28 days, either by mouth or intravenously, depending on the individual situation.

Needless to say, preventing Lyme disease is better than getting it. So I want to talk a bit about ticks and how to avoid tick bites. Ticks are small insects about the size of a sesame seed, but when they feed off human blood, they grow much larger (about  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch). Ticks do not fly, but move slowly on the ground and may settle on tall grass. It is also important to know that a bite from a tick does not always cause Lyme disease. If you live or work near woods or overgrown bush, or hike, camp, fish or hunt, or have an outdoor job working in landscaping or brush areas, you have a higher chance of getting Lyme disease.

Here are some tips on avoiding ticks:

- Wear light-coloured clothing, with long pants and a long sleeved shirt.
- Wear closed shoes and socks and tuck your pants into your socks. Do not wear sandals.
- Use a tick repellent containing DEET.
- Keep your grass well cut.
- Put a tick and flea collar on your pet.

If you are in an region where you know ticks are, make sure you check yourself for ticks, especially in the groin, scalp and armpit areas.

On a final note, if you do spot a tick on your skin, remove it with a pair of tweezers as soon as possible and wash and disinfect your hands and the bite area. If you can place the tick in a jar or screw-top bottle, you can send it to your local public health unit or office for identification and testing for Lyme disease. This helps public health authorities to determine and track any activity of Lyme disease in their area.

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