



Tick talk

by Charles Pinning

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Spring is here and the ticks are hungry! Should you be concerned? If you leave the house and venture off the porch, if you have pets who leave the house and return, the answer is, yes.

Ticks carry several diseases, but by far the most prevalent is Lyme Disease. In 2009, Massachusetts had 4019 confirmed cases of Lyme Disease, and Rhode Island, 150. Nationwide, 30,000 cases were reported. Left untreated, the ravages of Lyme Disease are the near equivalent of syphilis with none of the fun in the getting.

You might scoff and say, but what are my chances of getting Lyme Disease?

True, even in Massachusetts, which ranks third in the nation behind New York and New Jersey, confirmed cases account for only 61 out of 100,000 persons. But remember, those are confirmed, and most residents do not

live in high risk rural areas. How many are hobbling about in various stages of the disease, misdiagnosed as being arthritic, forgetful, fatigued...plagued with migraines, heart problems...diseases of the central nervous system? Bad knees?

And how many do not seek treatment because they lack medical insurance? Also, many doctors do not take Lyme disease patients because some insurers don't cover the cost of long-term treatment of the disease.

What's in a name?

What we call Lyme disease has been around for thousands of years. Speculation upon the cause was

varied. However, it all came together in 1975 when a number of cases with identical symptoms cropped up near Lyme Connecticut, and the disease was given a name.

Each year, the incidence of Lyme disease increases. This can be attributed to the ever-greater encroachment of humans upon land formerly forested or wild, bringing deer, rodents, and wildlife into closer contact with people.

Although the "deer tick" is associated with the transmission of Lyme disease, the connection to deer is not as direct as the name implies. The disease bacterium is carried primarily by small rodents, in particular the white-footed mouse (what most simply call a field mouse) and chipmunks, who pass it to the black-legged "deer tick" who then pass it along to us.

The road map

In the spring, a female tick lays about 3000 eggs in its preferred spot, usually

leaves on the ground. The eggs develop into larvae which then feed on small animals, like the mouse and chipmunk, and become infected with the bacteria that causes Lyme disease. Over the fall, they molt into nymphs who go dormant through the winter. When they awake in the spring, these nymphs are starving for a blood meal and feed on larger animals like a deer or...you. The engorged female tick then drops off, lays her eggs on the ground, and the cycle begins anew. Individual ticks have a two year life span.

One can be bitten by an adult tick year round, but it is when the tick is in the nymphal stage, April through August, that it is most aggressive, hungry for a blood meal, and dangerous. A nymph tick is about the size of a poppy seed and difficult to see, whereas an adult is more plainly visible and likely to be removed. The adult deer tick has a reddish cast, whereas other (non-deer, non-Lyme carrying) ticks are more brown in color.

Preventive measures

Wear light-colored clothing and tuck your pants into socks. Spray clothing with an insecticide containing Permethrin. Let it dry so that it bonds to the material. Wet, unbonded Permethrin is highly toxic to cats, but is not toxic to dogs.

Apply an insecticide with Deet to exposed skin. Avoid stone walls, where mice and chipmunks often live and overgrown areas. You can buy "Tick Tubes" made by a company called Damminix, available in Westport at Fieldworks. These are placed around the property and mice pull out Permethrin treated cotton balls and use them to make their nests. However, there is a year lag time before you will see results.

NOT recommended:

There is non-toxic Pyrethrin you can spray on areas likely to harbor ticks. This accomplishes immediate killing of ticks on contact. However, it breaks down quickly and its effectiveness

diminishes rapidly, usually within a day or so. Permethrin is synthetic Pyrethrin, and although you gain a more lasting insecticide, you also gain toxicity to birds, aquatic life, and cats.

(Also, don't you love the way that two similar, but also dissimilar substances have confusingly similar names. I mean, really—how do you keep Pyrethrin and Permethrin straight?)



The truth is, if you visit or live in the greener, leafier, more rural areas of Rhode Island and Massachusetts and like to get out and enjoy nature, you have a pretty good chance of a tick landing on you that's carrying Lyme Disease.

Be careful

Finally, after you've been in the woods or anywhere where ticks are likely to live, throw your clothes into the washing machine then dryer and inspect yourself. Have another inspect those parts of your body you can't see. Ticks prefer to bury themselves into soft folds of the skin or where there is compression. The stomach, near the waistband, is a popular place for them to burrow into you.

And if you do find one dining at your expense? Do not apply a hot match, Vaseline, gasoline, or anything else you've heard of to make them supposedly back out. It doesn't work. All it might do is encourage the tick to regurgitate your blood and its poison

into you. Instead, have on hand a pointy (not angled) pair of tweezers. You want to be able to grasp the tick as close to your skin as possible, without squeezing the body and pushing its poison into you.

After you've grasped the tick, pull it straight up and out, slowly steadily, in order to remove the head and mouth from your flesh. If part of the mouth happens to break off, don't panic. The poison is in the body. Either way, dab the spot with alcohol and keep an eye on it. If part of the head has been left in, don't be surprised if it takes a few weeks for the redness to go away. Eventually, your body will push out the remains of the head or mouth.

Ticks that have been removed within 24 hours of attachment are unlikely to have passed on the disease.

Symptoms

If you have contracted Lyme Disease, chances are you will develop the characteristic erythema migrans, a circular, reddish rash that has a bulls-eye appearance. This rash can appear on parts of the body other than where the bite occurred. However, about 30% do not develop this rash. Other early symptoms include headache, nausea, fever, aching joints and fatigue. Late stage symptoms, as mentioned earlier, are something you want to avoid, and can entail long-term antibiotic treatment, which can have serious side-effects of its own.

If all of this sounds frightening, it should. The truth is, if you visit or live in the greener, leafier, more rural areas of Rhode Island and Massachusetts and like to get out and enjoy nature, you have a pretty good chance of a tick landing on you that's carrying Lyme Disease.

April through October—inspect yourself for ticks. Get out the pointy tweezers. Deposit them in a jar of alcohol, which spells sure death for this scourge.

And remember: you can always get chickens. Chickens love to feed on ticks.