

Ticks and Lyme Disease: Symptoms, Treatment, and Prevention

Tick-borne diseases such as Lyme disease are on the rise. Cases in the United States increased from about 12,000 annually in 1995 to nearly 40,000 in 2015, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Experts believe the real number of infections is likely closer to 300,000. There are no licensed vaccines in the United States to aid in the prevention of Lyme disease in people.

Who Gets Lyme Disease, and at What Time of Year?

Lyme disease is transmitted via the bite of infected ticks, which attach to any part of the body, but often to moist or hairy areas such as the groin, armpits, and scalp.

While everyone is susceptible to tick bites, campers, hikers, and people who work in gardens and other leafy outdoor venues are at the greatest risk.

In the majority of cases, tick bites are reported in the summer months when ticks are most active and people spend more time outdoors. But this can extend into the warmer months of early autumn, too, or even late winter if temperatures are unusually high. Similarly, a mild winter can allow ticks, much like other insects, to thrive and emerge earlier than usual.

What Precautions Can I Take Against Tick Bites?

- Avoid wooded, brushy, and grassy areas, especially in May, June, and July.
- Wear light-colored clothing so that you can see ticks that get on you.
- Wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts, and shoes that cover the entire foot.
- Tuck pant legs into socks or shoes, and tuck shirts into pants.
- Wear a hat for extra protection.
- Spray insect repellent containing DEET on clothes and uncovered skin.
- Walk in the center of trails to avoid brush and grass.
- Remove your clothing, and wash and dry them at high temperatures after being outdoors.
- Do a careful body check for ticks after outdoor activities.

Lyme Disease in Dogs and Other Pets

Household pets can get Lyme disease, too. Typical symptoms in animals include swollen joints and lameness, fever, and loss of appetite.

There are ways you can reduce your pet's risk for tick bites and Lyme disease. Regularly checking pets for all types of ticks, for instance, reduces the risk of infection for both pet and owner. Avoid allowing your dog to roam in tick-infested areas. Topical, oral and/or collar products are also very important in preventing Lyme disease in dogs.

There are two basic types of Lyme disease vaccines available for dogs. Talk to your veterinarian to see if vaccination is appropriate for your dog. There is no vaccination for cats, which do not seem susceptible to Lyme disease.