Deer Ticks and Lyme Disease

In Vermont, the number of reported Lyme disease cases from exposure to ticks has nearly tripled in the last two years.

Lyme disease is an infection transmitted by the bite of infected black-legged ticks, known as deer ticks. The disease can cause skin rashes, fatigue, fever, chills, and pain and swelling in the muscles and joints. If left untreated, Lyme disease can lead to heart problems and neurological disorders. Patients treated with antibiotics in the early stage of the infection usually recover rapidly and completely.

Lyme disease can affect people of any age. People who spend time in grassy and wooded environments are at an increased risk of exposure. Young deer ticks, called nymphs, are active from mid-May to mid-August and are about the size of poppy seeds. Adult ticks are most active from March to mid-May and mid-August to November, and are about the size of sesame seeds. Ticks can be active any time the temperature is above freezing. Both nymphs and adults can transmit Lyme disease.

If you do find a tick attached to your skin, do not panic. Not all ticks are infected, and your risk of Lyme disease is greatly reduced if the tick is removed within the first 36 hours. The best defense against Lyme disease is to examine yourself at least once daily and remove any ticks without delay.

To remove a tick:

Use a pair of pointed tweezers to grasp the tick by the mouth parts right where they enter the skin. DO NOT grasp the tick by the body.

Pull firmly and steadily outward. DO NOT jerk or twist the tick. DO NOT attempt to make the tick “back out” by putting a lit match, Vaseline, rubbing alcohol, or any other substance on the tick. These can irritate the tick and cause it to regurgitate its gut contents onto your skin. The gut contents can contain the Lyme disease-causing bacterium.

If the mouthparts break off and stay in your skin, don’t worry; they alone cannot transmit Lyme disease. They will dry up and fall out by themselves in a few days.

Clean the bite wound with soap and water, rubbing alcohol or hydrogen peroxide.

Monitor the site of the bite for the next 30 days for any signs of Lyme disease.

Early signs of Lyme disease:

The first symptom is usually an expanding rash, which occurs at or near the site of the tick bite, usually in about 7 to 14 days. The center of the rash may clear as it grows, giving it the appearance of a bull’s eye. The rash may be warm, but is usually not painful.

Around the same time that the rash appears, other symptoms such as joint pains, chills, fever and fatigue are common. There may be swelling of lymph nodes near the tick bite.

If you think you have Lyme disease, contact your health care provider immediately. Early diagnosis of Lyme disease should be made on the basis of symptoms and history of tick bite. Blood tests may give false negative results if performed in the first month after the tick bite.

Protecting against ticks:

- Wear light-colored clothing with a tight weave to spot ticks easily.
- Wear enclosed shoes, long pants and long sleeves. Tuck pant legs into boots or socks and shirt into pants.
- Consider using insect repellent containing DEET or permethrin, following label instructions carefully.
- Avoid sitting on the ground or stone walls.
- Do a final, full body tick check at the end of the day, looking for what may look like nothing more than a new freckle or speck of dirt.