

Lyme disease

What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is an infection caused by the bacteria *Borrelia burgdorferi*. These bacteria are spread by the bites of blacklegged ticks, also known as deer ticks. Blacklegged ticks are found sporadically throughout the province of Ontario.

Lyme disease carrying ticks are more commonly found along the north shores of Lake Erie, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River. These ticks are particularly found in Long Point, Point Pelee, Rondeau Provincial Park, Turkey Point, St. Lawrence River National Park, and the Wainfleet Bog area. Lyme disease carrying ticks may also be found outside of these locations.

There are other types of ticks which are unable to give people Lyme disease. The ticks commonly found in the Middlesex-London area are called Dog ticks and are not able to give people Lyme disease.

How does Lyme disease happen?

Ticks are tiny and cannot fly. They move around the ground slowly or settle on tall grass and plants until they can attach themselves to humans passing by. They can work their way through clothing and bite into a person's skin. Even with a bite from an infected blacklegged tick, there is only a small chance of getting Lyme disease.

Ticks are most likely to give someone Lyme disease after being attached to a person for more than 24 hours. Because of this delay, prompt detection and removal of ticks is one of the key methods of preventing Lyme disease.

Lyme disease is NOT transmitted from person-to-person

Who is at risk?

People who frequent areas where infected ticks are common are at risk, especially travelers, hikers, and campers.

What are the symptoms of Lyme disease?

Symptoms of Lyme disease usually occur within one to two weeks of a tick bite but they may start as soon as three days or not show up for a month. Symptoms include: fever, headache, muscle and joint pains, fatigue and a skin rash in the shape of a bull's eye (called erythema migrans). If you develop any of these symptoms after a tick bite seek medical attention right away. It is important to let your doctor know where you were when you got your tick bite.

Later symptoms may develop even in people who did not have early signs of the disease or did not recognize them.

Lyme disease is rarely, if ever, fatal.

What is the treatment for Lyme disease?

Antibiotic treatment is generally effective in the early stages of the disease. In most circumstances, treating people who only have a tick bite is not recommended. People who are bitten by a blacklegged tick should remove the tick promptly and have the tick tested. It is recommended to seek medical attention if any symptoms of Lyme disease develop. Signs of infection or positive blood tests are needed before beginning treatment. It is possible to get re-infected after being treated for Lyme disease if you get another tick bite.

How can Lyme disease be prevented?

- Avoid entering areas where there are known to be a lot of ticks that carry Lyme disease, particularly in spring and summer.
- Wear light coloured clothing; it makes ticks easier to spot.
- Wear long pants, a long sleeved shirt, closed footwear and tuck your pants into your socks. Avoid walking barelegged in grassy or wooded areas where ticks may be found.
- Use an insect repellent that has "DEET". Apply it to your skin and outer clothing. Do not apply to damaged skin, and avoid the eyes and mouth. Avoid prolonged or excessive applications, especially in children. After a child returns indoors, treated skin should be washed with soap and water.
- Search your body well for ticks. Use a mirror to check the back of your body, or have someone else check it.
- When checking for ticks pay special attention to areas such as the groin, scalp and armpits. Ticks like to bite in areas where they will go unnoticed for a long period of time.

What should I do if I spot a tick?

- Grasp the tick as close to your skin as possible. Pull the tick upward and away from the body with steady pressure. Be sure to pull the tick straight out. Use tweezers if possible. If tweezers are not available, use fingers shielded with rubber gloves or facial tissue. Don't squeeze the tick. Squeezing can increase risk of infection. Do not try to burn it off or put anything on it.
- Wash hands after removing the tick, and cleanse the area with an antiseptic.
- Save the tick in a clean, covered jar if you can. You can have the tick identified by bringing it to the Middlesex-London Health Unit. This will help determine if it is the type of tick that carries Lyme disease. Knowing the type of tick may help to confirm illness should you develop symptoms. It will also help public health professionals identify areas of high risk.

If tick removal occurs within 24 hours of attachment, the risk of infection is substantially reduced.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Infectious Disease Control Team at (519) 663-5317 ext. 2330 or go to www.healthunit.com

References:

Ontario. Ministry of Health and Long-Term Care (2012, June 28). *Lyme disease*. Retrieved from <http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/publications/disease/lyme.aspx>

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