Riverwalk Medical Clinic—Fast Facts

Lyme Disease: Prevention is the Best Protection

Lyme disease, an inflammatory disease transmitted by the bite of a deer tick, has become a serious public health risk in certain areas of the United States and Canada. Campers, hikers, fishermen, outdoor enthusiasts, and other travelers or residents in endemic areas who have frequent or prolonged exposure to tick habitats during the spring and summer months are at increased risk for Lyme disease.

How ticks spread the disease

The bacterium that causes Lyme disease is spread by the bite of infected Ixodes ticks, commonly known as deer ticks. Ticks can attach to any part of the human body but are most often found in hairy areas such as the scalp, groin, and armpit. In most cases the tick must be attached for at least 48 hours before the bacteria can be transmitted. During the spring and summer months, when people spend more time outdoors, the young (nymphal) ticks are most often responsible for spreading the disease. These ticks are tiny (about the size of the head of a pin) and rarely noticed, making it difficult for people to find and remove an infected tick.

Tick habitat and distribution

The risk of exposure to infected ticks in greatest in woods and in thick brush or long grass, but ticks can also be carried by animals into lawns and gardens and into houses by pets. In the United States, most infections occur in the:

* Northeast, from Maryland to Maine.
* North central states, especially Wisconsin and Minnesota.

Symptoms and signs

Early Lyme disease is sometimes characterized initially by erythema migrans, the bull's eye rash that often occurs on the skin around a tick bite. The rash usually appears within three days to one month after being bitten. Other flulike symptoms of early Lyme disease include fatigue, headache, chills and fever, muscle and joint pain, and swollen lymph nodes.

Treatment and prognosis

Lyme disease can usually be cured by antibiotics if treatment begins in the early stages of infection. Most people who are treated in the later stages also respond well to antibiotics, although some may have persistent or recurring symptoms.

Protection from tick bites

* Here are some precautions to decrease the chances of being bitten by a tick:
* Avoid tick-infested areas, particularly in May, June, and July.
* Wear light-colored clothing, including long pants, socks, long-sleeved shirts, and a hat.
* Tuck pant legs into socks or boots and shirt into pants so ticks cannot crawl under clothing.
* Spray insect repellent containing a 20-30% concentration of DEET on clothes and exposed skin other than the face.
* Walk in the center of trails to avoid contact with overgrown brush and grass.
* Wash and dry clothing at a high temperature, inspect body surfaces carefully, and remove attached ticks with tweezers. Make sure to remove the head of the tick.