

Ticks / Lyme Disease

With the coming of warmer weather comes the dusting off of lawn furniture, baseball gloves, hiking shoes and many other items associated with the enjoyable events of the outdoors. Warmer weather also brings the associated nuisances, mainly pests. One of the most common pests early in the warmer season is the tick. Of the seventeen species of ticks found in Alabama, most can be found in the Huntsville area.

Ticks are linked with a serious health issue, Lyme Disease. Though Lyme Disease is associated to the Blacklegged (or deer) tick more frequently found in the Northeast and upper Midwest, many cases of Lyme Disease have been detected in the South. An adult Blacklegged tick is pictured below. It is the smaller nymphal stage ticks which most commonly bite humans.

Lyme Disease



Large, red, slowly spreading rash characteristic of Lyme Disease called erythema migrans (EM) rash

Deer ticks in the larval, nymphal, and adult stages (Not actual size)

How can I determine if my occupation places me at risk for Lyme Disease?

Any occupation that requires outdoor work in an endemic area should be considered a risk for Lyme Disease. Such occupations include utility work, surveying, landscaping, forestry, gardening, and right-of-way roadside clearing.

How do I know I'm at risk for contracting Lyme Disease?

Think of your potential risk as two-fold: (1) the risk of exposure to ticks and (2) the risk of contracting Lyme Disease following a tick bite.

(1) To assess your risk of exposure to deer ticks, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I live or vacation in a Lyme disease-endemic area (an area of high incidence or high risk)?
- Do I engage in high-risk activities, like hiking, gardening, or otherwise making contact with overgrown vegetation?
- Does my occupation require frequent outdoor work?
- Do I tend not to take precautions (e.g., wear tick repellent, check myself for ticks) against tick bites when I spend time outdoors?



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If you answered yes to only one of these questions, your risk of tick exposure is low. If you answered yes to both a) and any one of the other questions, your risk of exposure is high and you should take steps to prevent tick bites. If you answered yes to a) and two or more of the other questions, your risk is extremely high and you stand a good chance of being bitten by a tick unless you reduce your risk by avoiding tick habitat or conscientiously take precautions (for specific precautions, see Prevention and Control) at the following link: <http://www.aldf.com/lyme.shtml#prevent>

(2) To assess your risk of contracting Lyme Disease following a known tick bite, ask yourself the following questions:

- (a) Do I live in a Lyme disease-endemic area (an area of high incidence or high risk)?
- (b) Is the tick I just removed either a deer tick or a western black-legged tick?
- (c) If so, did the tick appear engorged (swollen like a balloon) vs. flattened?

If you answered no to any one or two of these questions, your risk of contracting Lyme Disease is low, but you should nevertheless be watchful for possible symptoms. If you answered yes to all three questions, your risk for Lyme Disease is high, and you should be particularly alert for any early symptoms, including the rash, that might develop in the next several weeks. If symptoms appear, call your physician immediately.

How do I determine if I live in an endemic area? View the map for Infected Tick Areas at the following link: <http://www.aldf.com/usmap.shtml>

In the United States, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has determined that endemic areas include non-urban communities throughout much of the Northeast (Southern Maine to Virginia), parts of the upper Midwest (Minnesota and Wisconsin) and areas along the West Coast (northern California and Oregon). State and county health departments can offer guidelines concerning the risk of Lyme Disease for a specific area.

Transmission of the bacterial virus takes place when the tick bites to feed off the blood of the host. Common symptoms of Lyme Disease are ring-shaped rash around the bite site, headache, and general flu-like symptoms. If untreated, the disease can later affect the joints, heart and nervous system. Though this illness can be treated in later stages with antibiotics, best results are achieved with early detection. In rare instances, this disease can cause permanent damage.

Not all ticks are infected, and studies show that transmission of the disease takes an average of 36 to 48 hours after the tick attaches to the host. Removal of ticks immediately after initial contact greatly reduces the chances of Lyme Disease contraction. Ticks cannot fly or jump and will normally seek out hosts by waiting on vegetation and then attaching themselves to the host when a human or animal brushes by. The tick will then tend to crawl upward until it reaches a protected area, often in a crease of the host's body. To avoid becoming a host for one of these common pests, the following dos and don'ts are provided when in the tick's environment:

- Wear enclosed shoes with pants tucked in.
- Wear light-colored clothing with a tight weave to spot ticks easily.
- Frequently check clothes and exposed skin for ticks while in their habitat.
- Avoid sitting on the ground; stay on cleared, well-traveled paths.
- Use insect repellent that contains DEET if in overgrown areas.
- Do a final body check at end of the day.

For additional information on Lyme Disease, visit the web pages of the American Lyme Disease Foundation at <http://www.aldf.com/lyme.shtml#whatIsLyme> or the Center for Disease Control (CDC) at http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/lyme/ld_humandisease_treatment.htm

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