

LYME DISEASE – BE WARY, NOT WORRIED, WHEN ENJOYING THE OUTDOORS!

Lyme disease is becoming increasingly common in Wisconsin and numerous other states. Since Lyme disease is spread by the bite of certain ticks, it is important for people who work or recreate outdoors to learn the facts about the disease and how to prevent it. By taking some simple precautions, we can all continue to safely enjoy the pleasures and benefits of outdoor activity.

What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is an infectious disease that can cause a wide variety of signs and symptoms. It is the result of an infection with a bacterium called Borrelia burgdorferi, which is transmitted to humans by the bite of infected ticks.

What are the symptoms of Lyme disease?

The symptoms of Lyme disease can vary a great deal from one case to the next.

In general, early signs and symptoms appear 3 to 32 days after a tick bite and include fever, fatigue, headache, aching joints, nausea, and often a characteristic skin rash. This rash, which occurs in about 70% of people with Lyme disease, tends to be roughly circular in shape, and is usually found at the site of the tick bite, although multiple rashes may often occur at other sites. In time, as the rash lesion gets larger, the center becomes clear (not reddened). The early symptoms may disappear on their own over a period of several weeks.

If Lyme disease is not treated when the early symptoms are present, many persons will develop late symptoms of the disease. These may occur weeks to even years after the initial exposure and can involve the joints, nervous system and heart.

Severe headache, stiff neck, weakness and/or pain in extremities, and facial paralysis (Bell's palsy) can result if the nervous system is affected.

If Lyme disease affects the heart, conduction disturbances in the heart can result, which may produce fainting spells or an abnormally slow heart rate.

Arthritis of the large joints is a common problem in the later stage of Lyme disease. The arthritis may be intermittent and in some persons may move from joint to joint.

Remember that an individual with Lyme disease will likely have only a few of the above symptoms, and that the early and later stages of the illness may overlap.

How does a person get Lyme disease?

The disease is acquired by a tick bite. The ticks that transmit the Lyme disease bacterium (Borrelia burgdorferi) typically become infected when the larval stage of the tick feeds on infected field mice. When subsequent stages of that tick (the nymph and adult stage) feed again, the infection can be transmitted to the tick's new host. The tick must actually be attached to a person's skin before it can transmit the Lyme disease bacterium.