TOWNSHIPS TODAY

A QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER BROUGHT TO YOU BY YOUR TOWNSHIP

Pennsylvania Leads Nation in Lyme Disease Cases

Learn to Protect Yourself and Your Family

Pennsylvania has led the nation in confirmed cases of Lyme disease for three straight years, and for the first time, deer ticks have been found in all of its 67 counties, the state Department of Health reports.

The number of Pennsylvanians diagnosed with the disease also continues to grow. Between 2013 and 2014, the cases of Lyme disease in the state jumped 25 percent, from 5,900 to 7,400, the Health Department says.

However, because diagnosing the disease can be difficult, many people who actually have it are misdiagnosed with other conditions. Therefore, many experts believe the true number of cases is much higher.

In addition, less than 50 percent of those diagnosed with the illness recall being bitten, according to the International Lyme and Associated Diseases Society (ILADS).

Lyme disease is called "The Great Imitator" because its symptoms mimic many other diseases. For instance, patients with the disease are frequently misdiagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, and various psychiatric illnesses, including depression.

'The great imitator'

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection that affects people of all ages and any organ of the body, including the brain and nervous system, muscles and joints, and the heart.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that the disease is most common in children, older adults, and others, such as road crew workers, firefighters and park rangers, who spend time outdoors and have higher exposure to ticks.

Lyme disease is called "the great imitator" because its symptoms mimic many other diseases. For instance, patients with Lyme disease are frequently misdiagnosed with chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, multiple sclerosis, and various psychiatric illnesses, including depression. Misdiagnosis delays treatment and allows the underlying infection to progress unchecked.

Most people get Lyme disease from the bite of a nymphal, or immature, tick. Nymphs are about the size of a poppy seed. Because they are so tiny and their bite is painless, many people do not even realize they have been bitten. Once a tick has attached, if undisturbed, it may feed for several days. The longer it stays attached, the more likely it will transmit Lyme and other pathogens into a person's bloodstream.

In the early stages, Lyme disease may feel like the flu, with the person experiencing fever, sore muscles, headache, and fatigue.

The CDC reports that rashes occur in 60 to 80 percent of cases. Most of the time, the rash is an ordinary red area. However, if it is a "bull's-eye" shape with a darker edge, this is a definite sign of Lyme disease and needs immediate treatment. Unfortunately, this distinctive rash occurs in less than 10 percent of those who contract Lyme disease. If you develop a rash, take a photo of it and see a doctor as soon as possible.

Testing for Lyme

Diagnostic testing is unreliable in the early stages of infection, often giving false negatives. However, treatment should not be delayed pending a positive test result if the suspicion of Lyme disease is high *(exposure, tick bite, possible rash).*

If Lyme disease is not diagnosed or treated early, the bacteria can spread and may go into hiding in different parts of the body. Weeks, months, or even years later, patients may develop problems with the brain and nervous system, muscles and joints, heart and circulation, digestion, reproductive system, and skin. Symptoms may disappear even without treatment, and different symptoms may appear at different times.

Untreated or undertreated Lyme can cause some people to develop severe symptoms that are hard to resolve. This condition may be referred to as post-treatment Lyme disease (PTLD) or chronic Lyme disease (CLD). It's unclear how many people who are diagnosed and treated remain ill. The CDC estimates range from 10 to 20 percent.

How to protect yourself

Experts say your best defense against tick-borne illness is to avoid contact with ticks in the first place. When that's not possible, take the following steps:

Know where ticks live — Ticks tend to be near the ground, in leaf litter, grasses, bushes, and fallen logs. High-risk activities include playing in leaves, gathering firewood, and leaning against tree trunks. When you hike, stay on cleared trails, instead of walking across grassy fields.

Dress defensively — Wear shoes, socks, long pants, and long sleeves. Tie back long hair and wear a hat. Light-colored clothing can help you spot ticks.

You can purchase clothing that has been pretreated with the repellent permethrin at outdoor recreation stores. *(The protection lasts through 70 washings.)* Or you can purchase permethrin and treat your own clothing. *(Protection lasts through five to six washings.)* Be sure to treat both the inside and outside of clothes.

Spraying footwear with permethrin will prevent ticks from crawling up your shoes. *(In one study, those with treated shoes had 74 percent fewer tick bites than those with untreated shoes.)*

Use repellent on exposed skin — Studies show that repellents with DEET, picaridin, or lemon eucalyptus oil are the most effective.

Check for ticks — When outdoors, periodically inspect your clothing and skin for ticks. Brush off those that aren't attached and remove any that are.

Take a shower — Once home, take a shower right away. This will wash away unattached ticks and allow you to thoroughly inspect yourself. Feel for bumps that might be embedded ticks. Pay careful attention to hidden places, including groin, armpits, backs of knees, belly button, and scalp. Parents should check their children.

Put your clothes in the dryer — Running your clothes in a hot dryer for 10 minutes before you wash them will kill any ticks that may be there.

Protect your pets — Ticks can infect dogs and cats, too. Also, their fur can act like a "tick magnet," carrying ticks inside your home. Consult with your veterinarian about tick protection for your pets.

Information courtesy of www.LymeDisease.org.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that the disease is most common in children, older adults, and others, such as road crew workers, firefighters, and park rangers, who spend time outdoors and have higher exposure to ticks.