

HEALTH AND SAFETY ALERT 17

LYME DISEASE

What is it?

Lyme disease is caused by infection with spiral bacteria called 'Borrelia burgdorferi'. The bacteria are spread by infected ticks (small, blood sucking ectoparasites) when they attach to your skin and feed on your blood.

Ticks are typically found in the countryside and usually in places such as woodland. However, they can also be found in some parks. Ticks are very small (about the size of a poppy seed) and can easily be overlooked. Late spring, early summer and autumn are the most likely times for infection, as these are the peak times of the year for tick feeding. Most ticks are not infected with the bacteria that cause Lyme disease. Even if a tick is infected, it does not spread the bacteria in the first few hours of its feed, so there is a very low risk of infection if a tick is removed quickly.



What are the symptoms?

A tick bite usually looks like a lump with a small scab on the skin surface at the site of the bite. Most people with Lyme disease then develop a reddish skin rash in a ring shape, and this may be the only sign of infection. The rash spreads out from the site of a bite after 3 to 30 days. Without treatment, these symptoms may last for weeks or even longer.

Early detection and treatment of the disease helps to relieve the symptoms and shorten the illness. For this reason, it is important to be aware of the symptoms, particularly the rash, so that treatment can be given early. The following symptoms may also develop in the first few weeks of an infection:

- tiredness/fatigue,
- generally feeling unwell,
- headache,
- fever,
- aches in muscles and joints,
- a stiff neck, and
- swollen glands (enlarged lymph nodes).



In rare cases there are more serious complications. These can affect the nervous system, joints, heart and other tissues.

Who can get affected?

Typically, anyone walking in countryside or through woodland in the UK may be at risk. The common factor is the presence of animals such as deer that provide a home for ticks to live on.

How can it be avoided?

Avoid being bitten. Ticks are tiny and spider-like, so difficult to see. When walking in places where the ticks may be, the following measures are helpful:

- wear long sleeves and trousers
- tuck trousers into socks
- wear light-coloured clothing so ticks are easier to see
- try not to sit on the ground in areas of vegetation
- keep to pathways and, where possible, avoid areas of overgrown vegetation
- check for ticks regularly during the day and especially before going to bed

If a tick is found on the skin, it should be removed straight away by gently gripping it as close to the skin as possible, preferably using fine toothed tweezers, and pull steadily away from the skin.

What is the treatment?

If you think you may have been bitten, tell your doctor, and mention that you've been in the countryside and report the incident. When infection with Lyme disease is suspected, blood tests can be used to help support the diagnosis. When confirmed, treatment is usually with oral antibiotics and patients experiencing on-going symptoms are treated with the appropriate medication. No vaccine is currently available.