

Lyme Disease

What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is a tick-borne illness caused by infection with the bacteria *Borrelia burgdorferi*. The Lyme agent is transmitted to persons only through the bites of infected blacklegged ticks. Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne disease in Virginia.

Who can get Lyme disease?

People of any age can get Lyme disease, but the illness is more common in persons under 16 years of age or persons older than 30 years of age. Anyone that spends time outdoors, particularly in tick-infested forest environments, is at greater risk of exposure; the peak transmission season occurs in May and June, but may occur throughout the year.

What are the symptoms of Lyme disease?

Most patients (about 75%) will see the development of a red rash called an erythema migrans (“EM” or “bull’s-eye” rash) around a tick bite site within days or weeks the tick bite. This rash expands (up to 12 inches in diameter) and often clears around the center. The rash does not itch or hurt, so it may not be noticed if it is on a person’s back-side or scalp. The initial illness may cause fatigue, fever, headache, muscle and joint pains, and swollen lymph nodes.

How soon after exposure do symptoms appear?

The EM rash can appear 3 to 30 days after tick exposure (usually by seven days); other symptoms begin to appear at the time of the rash.

How is Lyme disease spread?

The bacteria that causes Lyme disease is only transmitted through the bites of infected blacklegged ticks (deer ticks). The tiny blacklegged tick nymphs cause most cases of infection. Since blacklegged nymphs can be very small and because its bite produces little itch or irritation, most people never realize they have been bitten unless the tick attaches to a part of the body that is in plain sight. Lyme disease is not transmitted from one person to another.

What can happen if Lyme disease is not treated in the initial stage?

If untreated or improperly treated in the early stage of illness, some patients may develop one or several of the following symptoms: multiple EM rashes on their body, intermittent arthritis (pain and swelling) in their large joints (e.g., knees), facial palsy, heart palpitations, severe headaches/neck stiffness (due to inflammation of spinal cord), or neurological problems (shooting pains or numbness and tingling in hands and feet, or memory problems) months to years after the initial illness. Pain and swelling in large joints will occur in about 60% of untreated patients and neurological symptoms occur in about 5% of untreated patients. Arthritis and neurological problems may last for years after the infection.

How is Lyme disease diagnosed?

The diagnosis of Lyme disease is based primarily on signs and symptoms of illness. Laboratory tests for Lyme disease antibody may be done on a patient's blood to confirm the diagnosis, but if blood is collected too early in the course of illness, an infected person may not yield an antibody response. If laboratory confirmation is desired, re-testing may be necessary.

How is Lyme disease treated?

When Lyme disease is detected early and treated with an appropriate antibiotic (e.g., doxycycline), it is easily cured.

How can Lyme disease be prevented?

There is currently no vaccine available for Lyme disease prevention. Avoiding the bites from blacklegged ticks and promptly removing them if bitten is the only way to prevent Lyme disease. Blacklegged ticks live in forest habitats and in forest leaf litter, but may also be found in grass close to forest edges, or in any vegetation shaded by trees. When working or playing in these habitats, wear light-colored clothing and tuck pants into socks and shirts into pants; wear clothing, shoes, and socks that have been treated with (permethrin) repellents; apply other repellents (containing active ingredients such as DEET, Picaridin, oil of lemon eucalyptus, Bio-UD, or IR3535) to exposed skin; use "skin" repellents sparingly and avoid prolonged or excessive applications, especially on children. Check clothes and body surfaces carefully to remove ticks soon after being in tick habitats.

How should a tick be removed?

Remove attached ticks as soon as possible. Lyme disease transmission occurs once ticks have been attached for longer than 36 hours. Use fine-tipped tweezers to grab the tick's head as close to the skin as possible and exert a steady pull until the tick lets go. Do not jerk or twist the tick out, or squeeze the tick's body when removing it. The species identity of a tick will provide important clues as to what types of diseases it might carry, so you may want to save the tick for identification by placing it in a jar or plastic bag. You may freeze the tick or add alcohol to preserve it so that it can be easily identified.

How can I learn more about Lyme disease?

- 1) If you have concerns about Lyme disease, contact your local healthcare provider.
- 2) Call your local health department. A directory of local health departments is located at <http://www.vdh.virginia.gov/LHD/index.htm>
- 3) Visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website at <http://www.cdc.gov/lyme/>