

Lyme disease: know the facts



What is Lyme disease and what are its symptoms?

Lyme disease is an infectious disease transmitted by the bite of an infected tick. It causes a wide range of symptoms which may include a circular red “bull’s eye” rash, headaches, a stiff neck, facial palsy, extreme fatigue, muscle and joint pain, and disturbances of sight, hearing, co-ordination, digestive system and sleep.

What are ticks?

Ticks are blood-sucking arthropods related to spiders. There are many different species of tick in the UK, each preferring to feed on the blood of different animal hosts – though they will feed on human blood too if given the chance. **Their initial bite does not hurt or itch** because they inject an anaesthetic into their host’s skin.

Where are ticks found?

Ticks can be found all over the UK in gardens, woods, moors, and parks – London/city parks being no exception. **Not all** ticks carry Lyme disease. Infection rates in tick populations vary by geographic region and from year to year. Ticks carrying Lyme disease can be found throughout Europe, Scandinavia and N America.

How should a tick be removed?

Ticks should be removed as soon as possible, preferably with a tick removal tool which hooks underneath the tick and which does not risk squashing it. In an emergency, a thread of cotton can be wound close to the skin, and pulled upwards. Disinfect the area around the bite using antiseptic cream. **DO NOT** try to pull the tick out with your fingers, burn the tick or cover it with creams or chemicals. Eyebrow tweezers are **NOT** suitable.

How is Lyme disease diagnosed?

The symptoms mentioned above may appear between two and 30 days after a tick bite. Although a rash may appear quite shortly after a tick bite, blood tests will probably be negative initially. The test detects antibodies produced by the body in response to the infection, but they are not produced in detectable amounts for several weeks, or sometimes months, after infection. Many patients with untreated Lyme disease have positive blood tests within three to six weeks of being infected – but for various reasons some never produce enough antibodies to achieve a positive blood test.

Because there is no definitive test that can rule out Lyme disease, Lyme Disease Action believes Lyme disease should be diagnosed clinically by medical professionals who have ruled out other possibilities.

What is the treatment for Lyme disease?

Diagnosed and treated at an early stage, it is usually curable with antibiotics. Due to widespread lack of knowledge and awareness regarding tick-borne diseases in the UK - amongst GPs and the medical profession as a whole - many people with typical symptoms may not be tested for the disease. Many people with Lyme disease do not receive treatment at all because they remain undiagnosed or misdiagnosed.

Can Lyme disease be prevented?

There are [many measures that can be taken](#) to protect from infection. These include wearing suitable clothing (keeping arms and legs covered, if practicable) and frequently checking the skin for ticks. It is important to know how to remove a tick properly (see above) and to seek medical advice promptly if any symptoms appear.

Is Lyme disease on the increase in the UK?

The only recorded cases are those confirmed by laboratory tests, and these have increased rapidly since the first UK reported case in 1977. It is likely that the bacterium is spreading through the wildlife population, thus increasing the number of infected ticks, but better recognition is likely to have contributed to the increase.

LDA is a UK registered charity and a certified member of NHS England’s independent certification scheme for health and social care information: The Information Standard. LDA is also recommended by Public Health England as a source of reliable information.

Ends

February 2016

Press: Issued by Lyme Disease Action’s press office (www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk).

For more information, or to speak to Stella Huyshe-Shires, the Chair of Lyme Disease Action, or Dr Sandra Pearson, Medical Director, please contact press@lymediseaseaction.org.uk

A Lyme disease poster, showing how to remove a tick correctly, and leaflets on Lyme disease, are available for publication if required or for readers to take to their own local GP or veterinary practice – see <http://www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk/what-we-are-doing/information/to-download/>.