

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 from place to place and from year to year. Ticks carrying Lyme disease can be found throughout Europe, Scandinavia and North America.

Where do the ticks pick up Lyme disease?

Small mammals such as mice and squirrels carry the Lyme disease bacteria, as do birds. An immature tick may pick up the bacteria during a blood meal and pass the disease on to the next animal it feeds on, which might be a person. Deer, and most other ruminants such as sheep and cattle, have a natural immunity and do not pass on Lyme disease although they help support a large population of ticks.

How should a tick be removed?

Ticks should be removed as soon as possible, preferably with a tick removal tool which is designed to remove it without squashing. 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 as they risk squashing the tick’s body.

How is Lyme disease diagnosed?

The symptoms mentioned above appear on average 14 days after a tick bite. A blood 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 do not produce enough specific 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 considered other possibilities. Patients should not be tempted by offers from private, overseas laboratories which may promise “better” tests.

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, many people with typical symptoms may not have had the possibility of Lyme disease considered. A [NICE Guideline](#) was published in April 2018.

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 case was reported in 1985. It is likely that the bacterium is spreading through the wildlife population, thus increasing the number of infected ticks, but better recognition may have contributed to the increase in recorded numbers.

LDA is a UK registered charity and is recommended by UK HSA as a source of reliable information.

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For more information, or to speak to Stella Huyshe-Shires, the Chair of Lyme Disease Action, please contact press@lymediseaseaction.org.uk High res images of ticks and Lyme disease rashes are available on request.