

# Lyme Disease Myths: 9 Things You Should Know About The Tick-Borne Disease

The Huffington Post | By Sarah Klein

Posted: 05/20/2013 7:57 am EDT Updated: 05/20/2013 4:27 pm EDT



Warm spring weather promises lots of fun outdoor activities, but increased time outside also ups our risk for encounters with some of nature's peskier pests.

One such problematic insect is the tick, and its most commonly associated illness, Lyme disease. There were nearly 30,000 confirmed cases of the tick-borne disease in 2009, and rates are on the rise in northern states, according to recent research. While most outdoorsy types know that tick bites can cause Lyme disease and that ticks are most frequently encountered in tall grasses and wooded areas, many people's knowledge of Lyme disease ends there. That's why, in honor of Lyme Disease Awareness Month, we'd like to clear up a few of the following Lyme disease myths:

## **Myth: All Ticks Carry Lyme Disease**

**Fact:** There are a number of types of ticks, but only blacklegged ticks (commonly called deer ticks) carry the bacterium that causes Lyme disease, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Lone star ticks, the American dog tick, the Rocky Mountain wood tick and the brown dog tick do not transmit the disease.

## **Myth: All Deer Tick Bites Result In Lyme Disease**

**Fact:** First of all, not all deer ticks are infected with the Lyme disease bacterium. "In

areas where [Lyme disease] is very common, one out of every four or five ticks might be infected," says Paul Mead, M.D., MPH, chief of epidemiology and surveillance activity at the CDC. "In other areas where it's much rarer, that may be more like one in 100."

Second, if a tick is removed within 24 hours of biting, risk of infection drops dramatically. "It's important to take a definitive step quickly," says Mead. "If you look for ticks every day and -- [if you] find them -- remove them, you aren't likely to get Lyme disease."

### **Myth: The Best Way To Remove A Tick Is To Burn It**

**Fact:** Folk remedies like burning the tick off of your skin or suffocating it with nail polish just prolong the window of time for that bugger to infect you. Instead, use tweezers to remove the offending insect as quickly as possible. Mead explains that the CDC recommends grasping the tick with the tweezers as close to the skin as possible, then pulling upward without twisting. Be sure to clean the area after -- and your hands!

### **Myth: You Only Have Lyme Disease If You Have The Telltale Bull's Eye Rash**

**Fact:** While it is a very common sign of Lyme disease, and perhaps the most obvious one, not everyone develops the characteristic rash. It shows up in about 80 to 90 percent of people, according to the American Lyme Disease Foundation (ALDF), and usually appears as a red blotch with a red ring emanating from the site of the tick bite. It may be warm to the touch but usually isn't itchy or painful. If you've been bitten by a tick and notice other possible symptoms, like fevers, headaches and muscle pain, consult a doctor as soon as possible.

However, it's not unheard of for someone not to develop the rash -- or to simply not see it, according to Mead, especially if it's somewhere hidden like the scalp. "The symptoms sound like flu symptoms, but they occur in the late spring and early summer," Mead says. "If you get those symptoms and live in an area where Lyme disease is common, you may want to consider that possibility."

The longer Lyme disease goes undiagnosed and, therefore, untreated, the more severe the symptoms can become. Untreated infection can cause a paralysis to facial muscles called Bell's palsy, irregular heartbeats, arthritis and short-term memory problems, says Mead.

### **Myth: There Is No Cure For Lyme Disease**

**Fact:** When treated with antibiotics in the early stages of the disease, Lyme disappears in almost all people -- and quickly, too. But in a small number of people, symptoms like muscle and joint pain or memory problems persist. Researchers are currently trying to determine how long a person should be treated with antibiotics in

these instances of what is sometimes referred to as "chronic lyme disease," according to the National Institutes of Health.

Experts don't know the exact cause of this cluster of lingering symptoms, more properly called post-treatment Lyme disease syndrome, Mead explains. There is ongoing debate among experts as to whether or not ongoing symptoms reflect continuing infection or "whether it is a post-infectious complication," he says. Imagine, he explains, a person who has broken his leg. If it doesn't heal right, it's not that it's still *broken*, but it may continue to cause pain or weakness. So too might a prior Lyme infection cause continuing discomfort. Studies have shown, however, that further treatment with antibiotics has no benefit -- and can be harmful.

### **Myth: A Blood Test Is The Best Way To Diagnose Lyme Disease**

**Fact:** It depends on how long after a tick bite we're talking about, says Mead. "The most widely-used test for Lyme disease doesn't test for the organism itself, but for antibodies that your immune system makes," he says. "When you are first infected, your body hasn't had time to make those antibodies, and you can test negative in the early stages of the disease."

If, however, someone has been infected for months or even years without knowing it, -- say they go to a doctor for symptoms of arthritis and don't even recall having a summer fever the year before -- "then the test is quite good for detecting infection," he says.

### **Myth: You Can Get Lyme Disease Everywhere In The U.S.**

**Fact:** More than 97 percent of all cases of Lyme disease occur in the northeastern and north-central parts of the country, says Mead. Your chances of being bitten by an infected tick outside of those regions are very small. While there have indeed been reported cases in nearly all 50 states, Lyme disease is reported by state of *residence*, not necessarily the state of infection. A child from Wyoming who spends the summer in Pennsylvania with Grandma and comes down with Lyme disease will count as a reported case for Wyoming, says Mead, even though her chances of getting Lyme in her home state are tiny.

### **Myth: Lyme Disease Can Spread Between People**

**Fact:** From time to time you do see a husband and a wife, for example, who both come down with Lyme disease around the same time, says Mead, but there's no solid evidence to support the idea that one of them passed it to the other. It's much more likely that they were both bitten by ticks, especially since young ticks can be so small, he says.

### **Myth: You Can Get Lyme Disease From A Pet**

**Fact:** Fido and Fluffy can get Lyme disease, but there is no evidence to suggest pets

can spread the disease to humans. However, "pets are important vehicles for ticks to get into the household and come into contact with humans," Mead says. Pet owners may want to consider tick control powders, sprays, collars or other products for their furry friends.