

Lyme Disease

What is Lyme disease? Lyme disease is a tick-borne infection that normally lives in small animals.

What are the symptoms of Lyme disease? The first sign of infection is usually a circular rash. This rash begins at the site of a tick bite. A distinctive feature of the rash is that it gradually expands over a period of several days. The center of the rash may clear as it expands, resulting in a bull's-eye appearance. It may be warm but is not usually painful. Individuals also experience symptoms of fatigue, chills, fever, headache, muscle and joint aches, and swollen lymph nodes.

If left untreated, the individual may experience loss of muscle tone on one or both sides of the face (called facial or “Bell’s palsy”), severe headaches and neck stiffness due to meningitis. Shooting pains, heart palpitations, dizziness and pain that moves from joint to joint is also possible.

How soon do symptoms appear after infection occurs? The rash typically occurs 3-30 days after a bite by an infected tick. After several months, most untreated patients begin to experience arthritis. The knees are most often affected.

How is Lyme disease spread? Lyme disease is transmitted through the bites of certain species of black-legged ticks. There is no evidence that Lyme disease is transmitted person-to-person. Untreated Lyme disease in pregnant women may lead to infection of the placenta and stillbirth. No negative effects on the fetus have been found when the mother receives appropriate antibiotic treatment. Lyme disease is not transmitted through breast milk. Although dogs and cats can get Lyme disease, there is no evidence that they spread the disease directly to their owners. However, pets can bring infected ticks into your home or yard. Consider protecting your pet, and possibly yourself, through the use of tick control products for animals.

How is Lyme disease treated? Individuals treated with antibiotics in the early stages of the infection usually recover rapidly and completely. A few patients, particularly those diagnosed with later stages of disease, may have persistent or recurrent symptoms. These patients may benefit from a second 4-week course of therapy. Longer courses of antibiotic treatment have not been shown to be beneficial and have been linked to serious complications, including death.

How can you prevent Lyme disease? The best way to prevent Lyme disease is to avoid areas where ticks are likely to be found. If you live in or visit a high-risk area, you should follow these precautions:

- Use insect repellents that contain DEET on your clothes or exposed skin.
- Wear a long-sleeved shirt and long pants. Tuck your pant legs tightly into your socks.
- Check for ticks every day. Their favorite places are on the legs, in the groin area, in the armpits, along the hairline, and in or behind the ears.
- Ticks are tiny, so look for new “freckles.”
- Remove any ticks promptly using fine point tweezers.
- The tick should not be squeezed or twisted.
- Grasp the tick close to the skin and pull out straight with steady pressure.

Know the symptoms of Lyme disease.