
Lyme disease



Information for you

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What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is an infection which can affect the skin and occasionally cause serious illness of the nervous system, joints or heart. It is caused by a germ called *Borrelia burgdorferi*, which is introduced into the body by the bite of an infected tick (*Ixodes ricinus*).

What are the symptoms of Lyme disease?

If you are bitten by a tick you may develop a rash. This rash may look like an expanding red circle with a pale centre. The rash appears between three and 30 days after you are bitten.

Early symptoms may resemble flu with swollen glands near the bite site, mild headaches, aching muscles and joints and tiredness.

If the bite is left untreated the disease may develop over months and even years, when facial muscle weakness, weakness or pains in different parts of the body, meningitis like symptoms and /or arthritis may occur.

Who can it affect?

You can get the infection in the course of activity holidays, including walking, trekking and mountain biking or while working in infected wooded areas. Areas in the UK where people acquire Lyme disease include popular holiday and outdoor activity

destinations such as the the Scottish Highlands and Islands. Although these are high risk areas for Lyme disease, any area where the Ixodid tick is present should be regarded as a potential risk area.

When travelling abroad always take advice from local health services about the possible risks of Lyme disease in the area.

How is it spread?

Ticks that carry the germ can be found in woodland, moor land and other grassy areas associated with wild animals such as deer and birds. The ticks bite the individual and remain in place for some time. The germ is not passed until the tick has been in place for 36-48 hours.

There are two stages when the tick can pass on the infection. These are the nymph stage, when the tick can be very small (about the size of a poppy seed) and are not felt on the skin; and from the adult tick, which is larger and easier to identify. Both forms of the tick swell with the blood of the host and become more obvious on the skin.

How is it diagnosed?

Diagnosis can sometimes be difficult especially if you have been bitten and do not realise this. It is therefore important to be aware of the symptoms and the kind of places and activities that can put you at risk, and to

be aware of ways to reduce risks.

Lyme disease is diagnosed by a blood sample. The sample is tested for rising antibody levels to the germ. In early stages of the disease this test is unhelpful, repeat specimens may be required as these antibodies are not produced in detectable amounts for several weeks.

How can spread be prevented?

The tick can attach to any part of the body but often travels until it finds a dark moist environment; these include the groin, arm pits, and the scalp. The tick has to have a blood meal before the germ is transmitted to the person. The tick has to be attached for 36-48 hours before the germ is injected into the person. It is essential before or after walking in infected areas that you follow this advice:

- When hill walking wear long trousers tucked into boots or socks and long sleeved shirts. Wearing light coloured fabrics make ticks easier to see.
- Walk in the centre of paths so that you avoid overhanging grass, bushes, undergrowth.
- Use insect repellent on clothes and body.
- Check your skin and clothing regularly and remove any ticks as soon as possible.

- Always check the head, hair and neck of young children.
- Check pets for ticks as they are also at risk of infection. Insect repellent collars may reduce the likelihood of tick bites.
- Remove ticks by grasping with blunt ended tweezers as close to the skin as possible and pulling steadily away from the skin. Take care to remove it entirely using gentle but firm pressure, as the head can break off and cause secondary infection.
- If possible place any ticks you have found in a container for identification.
- If houses are located in tick-infected areas consideration should be given to clearing long grass, bushes and undergrowth around the house and the perimeter garden, as this will reduce the numbers of ticks in the area.

How is it treated?

- If a bite remains inflamed, the rash around it starts to spread, or you feel unwell, contact your family doctor (GP) as soon as possible. Remember to inform your GP of any possible bites.
- Antibiotics may be given if an infection is noted or suspected.

- If there are other symptoms apart from the rash, such as joint pains and muscle fatigue, hospital admission and further tests may be required.

For further information on Lyme disease contact:

Health Protection Nurse Specialist

Department of Public Health

NHS Ayrshire & Arran

Telephone 01292 885 858

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