

FACTS ABOUT LYME DISEASE

What is Lyme Disease? Lyme Disease is a newly identified tick-borne illness that causes arthritis and, in some people, disorders of the heart and central nervous system. It is most common in the Northeast coastal states (from Maine to Maryland) and in the upper Midwest (Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota) and on the Pacific Coast (in California and Oregon). Lyme disease is most often contracted in the late spring and early summer.

What causes Lyme Disease? It is caused by *Borrelia burgdorferi*, a spirochete form of bacteria. This disease is transmitted by the bite of a deer tick, an insect about the size of a pin. In addition to deer, these ticks are found on birds and many small animals, including field mice and other rodents.

How is Lyme Disease diagnosed and treated? Lyme Disease is diagnosed on the basis of blood tests and symptoms. It is treated with antibiotics, usually tetracycline or penicillin, which are given orally for at least two weeks. Pregnant women and patients with severe cases may require hospitalization and/or intravenous antibiotic therapy.

What can you do yourself? If fatigue is severe, rest is necessary. Aspirin or acetaminophen can relieve the flu-like symptoms and joint pain. Avoid excessive use of inflamed or swollen joints; over-use may result in permanent joint damage.

When should I see my doctor? If you experience any symptoms, see your doctor as soon as possible. A pregnant woman who thinks she has been bitten by a deer tick should see her doctor even in the absence of symptoms. Treatment is most effective if it is started within a week to ten days after infection.

What will the doctor do? Blood tests to detect antibodies against the bacterium that causes Lyme Disease will be ordered. However, because current antibody tests do not always detect Lyme disease in its early stages, a doctor may begin antibiotic treatment even if the test is negative.

Aspirin or other anti-inflammatory drugs may be prescribed to ease pain and joint symptoms. Extra rest is also advised.

The course of Lyme Disease. The course of the illness varies greatly from one person to another and may be dependent on genetic factors. After a week or two of flu like illness, which may be accompanied by a rash, symptoms usually disappear. If the disease is untreated in this early stage, serious complications involving the heart, joints and nervous system may develop weeks or months later. Even so, complications occur in about 15 percent of those patients who undergo early treatment. Because of the diversity of its symptoms, Lyme Disease is often misdiagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis, meningitis, or multiple sclerosis. Fatigue, mood changes and neurologic problems are often mistaken for mental illness.

Is Lyme Disease dangerous? It is rarely fatal, but heart complications may cause life threatening abnormal heart rhythms, and infection during pregnancy may cause fetal loss. Symptoms may impair the quality of life for months or years.

What can you do to avoid Lyme Disease?

1. Avoid tick exposure in endemic areas
2. Walk along cleared or paved surfaces rather than on grass or in woods.
3. Wear long-sleeved shirts that button at the wrist, long pants tucked into socks, and closed shoes. Choose light-colored fabric so you can spot and brush off ticks.
4. Use insect repellents containing DEET and or permethrin. Follow package instructions.
5. Use flea and tick collars on your pets and brush them carefully after they have been outdoors.
6. If you are bitten by a tick, remove the tick immediately by grasping it as close to the skin as possible with tweezers and tugging gently.
7. In areas where deer ticks are common, mow weeds and grass around the house.
8. Try to discourage birds or animals that may harbor the ticks from coming near the house. Bird feeders, for example attract birds as well as rodents and other animals that carry deer ticks.