

BE WELL

7 Things You Should Know About Deer Ticks

By Debbie DeAngelo
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If you live in the Northeast, mid-Atlantic or upper Midwest regions of the United States, then you're no stranger to deer ticks. Also called the black-legged tick, they are often the size of a poppy seed, which makes them difficult to detect on your skin. Their bulb shaped abdomen is flat until it feeds off a host and expands. Given that we live in a Lyme-disease prone area, it pays to know a thing or two about deer ticks.

Tick Talk

Yes, ticks were around when we were kids; however, fewer were Lyme carriers. Their numbers have been on the rise too. They're now more likely to reside in our backyards, not just in the woods. Also, deer ticks can hitch a ride into our homes via our fur babies.

Although there's no reason to panic, we should be aware and prepared – and that means being familiar with these facts about deer ticks.

Ticks crawl upwards. Ticks don't fly through the air and come in for a landing on us. They latch onto your foot or leg and crawl up your body until they find their favorite destination. They are stealth litter critters, so we don't usually feel them when they're on the move.

They're active all year round. Spring through Fall is the period of heightened activity, but adult deer ticks aren't killed by freezing temperatures. They are especially active on the days the snow thaws during winter and early spring.

Only deer ticks transmit Lyme disease. Dog ticks, as well as other types of ticks, don't transmit Lyme. Only an infected deer tick can do that ... and not all deer ticks carry the organism that causes the disease. That's why proper identification and testing of the tick is important. Generally, an infected deer tick must be attached for over 24 hours (usually 36 to 48 hours) to inject the organism that causes Lyme. This means daily tick checks are vital. It's unlikely that an infected tick will make you sick if you remove it the same day it attaches.

Tick checks are simple. Peace of mind takes only five minutes. Using a full length and handheld mirror, examine every square inch of skin. Enlisting the aid of another individual makes this easier. Pay special attention to your hairline and scalp, armpits, behind the knees, inside the belly button, beneath skin folds, around and inside the ears, and in the groin. Depending on the stage of the tick, it may look like a poppy seed or freckle, so inspect closely.

Remove ticks with tweezers. There are tick removal kits on the market that work, but so does a pair of fine-tipped tweezers. Think of a tick's body as a germ-filled balloon. If you squeeze the body, any bacteria it's carrying gets pushed to the head of the tick, which is attached to your skin. Grab the tick right next to your skin with the tweezers or removal device and pull it up steadily until it's detached. After saving the tick in a sealed plastic bag for identification, clean the wound with soap and water. Thoroughly wash your hands when finished.

Identify and test the tick. Once the tick has been removed and saved, it needs to be identified. There are a variety of ticks, but only a deer tick that's carrying the Lyme spirochete can infect you. If it's a deer tick, more testing can be done to determine if it could transmit disease. Identification and testing resources vary by state, so start with your local health department for guidance. For residents of Pennsylvania, log onto ticklab.org. They provide these services

free of charge. Remember, even if it's a disease-carrying deer tick, you may not become infected if the tick was removed within a day of attachment. In any event, be sure to report to your doctor signs of illness such as fever, headache, fatigue, and rash, while awaiting test results.

Be proactive about tick prevention.

Here are a few steps with which to start:

- Perform daily skin and clothing check for ticks within two hours of being outside.
- After performing high-risk outdoor activities (gardening, mowing, camping, hiking, hunting), place clothing in dryer on high for 10 minutes to kill ticks. Shower within two hours of these outdoor activities.
- Examine pets after they have been outside.
- Clear tall grass and brush from your yard. If desired, treat your lawn with insecticides; however, you will still need to take tick precautions.
- When engaging in outdoor activities in grassy or wooded areas, wear clothing and use gear with built-in repellent. Alternatively, you can spray permethrin on your clothes, shoes, and gear. Do not spray it directly on your skin. Long-sleeved shirts and pants provide more protection. Be sure to tuck your shirt into the waistband of your pants and your pant legs into your socks. Light colored clothing makes the ticks more visible.

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