

Taking the Bite out of Tick Season

The summer months provide the perfect opportunity to conquer cabin fever and explore the great outdoors. But before you head out for that hike, health care experts remind you to take precautions to avoid tick bites.

“A tick will get on your body and will stay there. It'll bite you and embed into your skin. If that tick is removed within 24 hours, the chance of getting ill is diminished. After 24 hours there's a chance you could get some illness transmitted from that tick itself,” says Dr. Richard Ginnetti, an OSF HealthCare primary care physician in Bloomington, Illinois.

One of the most common tick-borne illnesses is Lyme disease, which is a bacterial infection. You get it when the blacklegged tick, also known as a deer tick, bites you and stays attached for 36 to 48 hours.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) estimates around 300,000 people are infected with Lyme disease each year. Dr. Ginnetti says there are tell-tale signs of Lyme disease, including a rash around the bite mark that takes the shape of a bullseye.

When caught early, Lyme disease can be treated with antibiotics. When untreated, however, the disease can develop into meningitis or other severe illnesses which can require hospitalization and further treatment.

“It looks like a bullseye – a bullseye type rash - that's pathognomonic of the disease,” Dr. Ginnetti explains. “It's relatively simply treated with antibiotics early on. However, if the first stage is missed, it can go on to develop arthritis, neurological disease and also cardiac conditions. So it will potentially cause a large amount of pathology if not treated initially.”

According to Dr. Ginnetti, the best action against Lyme disease is to pay attention to your surroundings and avoid the bite in the first place. Before heading into the great outdoors he recommends wearing long pants and long sleeves, as well as applying an EPA-registered insect repellent containing DEET.

After spending time in areas ticks are known to inhabit, such as wooded areas, tall grass, and brush, immediately check yourself, your children and pets for ticks. If one is found, remove it promptly and monitor any bite areas.

“If you find a tick on you, you want to remove it as soon as possible,” Dr. Ginnetti urges. “The best way to remove it is just with some tweezers. Get as close as possible to the tick on the skin. And then try to gently pull it off about 90 degree angle from you. That's the best way to do it. Once the tick is off wash with soap water, rub on some alcohol and it should be fine. As long as the tick has been on less than 24 hours, most of time that's all you need to do.”

[The CDC gives us some simple steps](#) to keep tick bites at bay:

Avoid Direct Contact with Ticks

- Avoid wooded and brushy areas with high grass and leaf litter.
- Walk in the center of trails.

Repel Ticks on Skin and Clothing

- Use repellent that contains 20 percent or more DEET, picaridin, or IR3535 on exposed skin for protection that lasts several hours.
- Use products that contain permethrin on clothing. Treat clothing and gear, such as boots, pants, socks and tents with products containing 0.5% permethrin. It remains protective through several washings. Pre-treated clothing is available and may be protective longer.
- The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has an [online tool](#) to help you select the repellent that is best for you and your family.

Find and Remove Ticks from Your Body

- Bathe or shower as soon as possible after coming indoors (preferably within 2 hours) to wash off and more easily find ticks that are crawling on you.
- Conduct a full-body tick check using a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body upon return from tick-infested areas. Parents should check their children for ticks under the arms, in and around the ears, inside the belly button, behind the knees, between the legs, around the waist, and especially in their hair.
- Examine gear and pets. Ticks can ride into the home on clothing and pets, then attach to a person later, so carefully examine pets, coats, and day packs.
- Tumble dry clothes in a dryer on high heat for 10 minutes to kill ticks on dry clothing after you come indoors.