

10 Things Kids Should Know About Lyme Disease

Lyme disease is the most common vector-borne disease in the United States, with more than 20,000 new cases reported every year. Lyme has been found in all 50 states, and a high percentage of its victims are children, says Debbie Siciliano, co-chair of Time for Lyme, Inc., a research, education, and support group in Greenwich, CT.

"Children are particularly vulnerable because they are outside a lot, especially in the early summer, when ticks are most plentiful," she adds. If they do get infected, kids can experience headaches, fatigue, and flu-like symptoms, and if the disease is left untreated, can also develop learning and behavioral problems, depression, nerve damage, memory loss, and other cognitive, psychiatric, and neurological problems.

But many children—and their parents—don't know much about Lyme disease. Following is a list of 10 things every kid (and parent) should know:

1. Lyme Comes from Ticks

Technically speaking, Lyme disease is caused by bacteria called *Borrelia burgdorferi*, which are carried by parasitic (blood sucking) ticks called Ixodes, also known as black-legged or deer ticks. The bacteria live inside the tick, and can be transmitted when the tick attaches itself to a host and begins to suck up blood.

2. Ticks are Everywhere

Lyme disease got its name from the town of Lyme, Connecticut, where it was first identified, and it's most common in the Northeast, mid-Atlantic, and Great Lakes regions. But it's been reported all over the United States—and in 50 countries around the world.

3. Ticks are Tiny

Ixodes ticks are very, very small, especially in the first and second stage of its life (larval and nymphal). In fact at this stage, unless they're already engorged (full of blood), they're much smaller than the head of a pin and nearly impossible to see. Ticks are especially good at hiding in dark places like the scalp and underarms, where you're even less likely to find them. Kids need a head-to-toe check every time they're out in tick territory.

4. Ticks are Animal-Lovers

Lyme-carrying ticks are typically stowaways on deer, squirrels, and mice and are most often found in areas where these animals are common. Ticks can also catch a ride on the family pet, so you should be sure to check the dog or cat every time he comes in from the outside. (Don't mistake the ticks that transmit Lyme with the common dog tick, which is much bigger, although dog ticks may carry diseases.)

5. Ticks Dig Plants

You'll also find plenty of ticks in wooded areas, parks, and forests as well as your own backyard and in dune grasses at the beach. Kids should stick to the trails and open areas and avoid wet, wooded areas, tall grass and leaf-littered areas.

6. Summer is Tick Time

The ticks that transmit Lyme disease are most active (and plentiful) in May, June, and July and most difficult to find as they are typically in the nymphal stage. They are also out there when the ground temperature is above 35 degrees F.

7. DEET Works

You wouldn't want to bathe in the stuff, but it's the most effective way to repel Lyme-carrying ticks. Just use it wisely: use just enough to cover exposed skin, apply it to your own hands and then rub them on your child (avoid his eyes and mouth), don't apply to a young child's hands (little kids often put their hands in their mouths) and don't apply to cuts or irritated skin.

8. Light Clothes are the Right Clothes

Kids should wear light-colored clothing, which makes it easier to spot ticks, with long sleeves and legs (tuck pants into socks).

9. Timing is Everything

The chances of contracting Lyme disease from an infected tick increases with the length of time it's attached. If you find a tick, grasp it with fine-tipped tweezers and pull away from the skin without crushing its body. If you think your child was bitten by an infected tick, see the doctor right away—the sooner you begin treatment, the better.

10. Rashes Aren't Required

Lyme disease is associated with a red, bulls-eye-shaped rash, but many people never see one (and don't remember being bitten by a tick). Also know that not all Lyme rashes have a bulls-eye. So if your child starts to develop symptoms of a Lyme infection, see your pediatrician—rash or no rash.

Time for Lyme is an organization dedicated to eliminating the devastating effects of Lyme disease and other tick-borne illness. Their mission is to prevent the spread of disease, develop definitive diagnostic tools and effective treatments, and to ultimately find a cure for tick-borne illness by supporting research, education, and the acquisition and dissemination of information. In addition, they will continue to support Lyme disease sufferers and their families through legislative efforts on the federal, state, and local levels. [Click here](http://www.timeforlyme.org/) (http://www.timeforlyme.org/) for more information on this organization.