

Lyme Disease: Bite Back at Deer Ticks

Summer brings kids long days of leisure, but it also has its share of bumps, scrapes and insect bites. While most of these are harmless, children who play in long grass or the woods can be at risk for Lyme disease, a potentially serious bacterial infection.

The bacteria responsible for Lyme Disease is carried by deer ticks. The disease is spread when an infected tick bites and attaches itself to the skin. The first sign of Lyme disease is often a red rash that starts as a spot, spreading in size over time and often developing a bull's-eye appearance. A fever, stiff neck, muscle and joint fatigue are also associated with the disease. Cases left untreated can lead to swelling and arthritis of the joints, especially the knees.

Although Lyme disease can have serious complications, it is treatable with antibiotics. A simple blood test can help determine if a person has been infected with the disease.

The best way to keep your children safe from Lyme disease is to avoid deer ticks. This means being aware of where your kids play - if they are in the woods or areas with tall grass, check carefully for ticks on clothing or on their bodies when they come inside. Lighter clothing makes it easier to spot ticks, which are only about the size of a poppy seed. Pets often pick up ticks in their fur and then carry them into the house, so check them closely as well.

If your child is going into an area where there might be deer ticks, there are some precautions you can take. Make sure they wear long-sleeved shirts and pants that fit tightly around the ankles. Also, tuck your child's pant legs into her socks to keep ticks out. If you find a tick attached to the skin, pull gently with tweezers to remove the entire tick including its head, then apply antiseptic to the bite area. Do not worry if you do not completely remove the tick – the part that is imbedded is the head and that does not transmit disease and it will fall off harmlessly later.

Even though Lyme disease cases have been reported throughout the country, most cases are concentrated in the mid-Atlantic, northeast, and upper Midwestern states as well as northern California. It is also estimated that only one in 100 deer ticks carry the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. Despite this, be cautious when your child is outside - the best way to avoid the disease is to not take any chances.

It is important to know that a tick must be embedded in the skin, and be on the body for at least 24 hours to cause infection. Basically, the tick feeds on the skin until it is engorged and then regurgitates and passes the infection. Therefore, the best way to prevent Lyme disease is to do tick checks daily. Removing any ticks before they have been on the body for longer than a day will protect your child from Lyme disease.