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Advocates offer do's and don'ts for removing ticks

As the summer season is upon us, schedules fill with outdoor activities such as barbecues, summer camp, hiking, gardening, golfing and vacations. With more time spent outdoors, the risk of contracting Lyme disease skyrockets. Lyme disease comes from a small and painless deer-tick bite that can easily go unnoticed.

The best prevention technique for contracting Lyme disease involves staying out of high-risk areas such as the edges of woods, shaded areas, stone walls and tall grassy areas, to name a few, and wearing long sleeves and tucking long pants into socks. But these prevention methods are hard to enforce for kids and adults enjoying the summer months, so checking yourself and your kids thoroughly for the small ticks after a day spent outside is a critical step in the prevention of Lyme disease.

But if you find a tick, what should you do?

According to Debbie Siciliano, co-founder of Time for Lyme, a nonprofit Greenwich-based Lyme disease advocacy group, there are specific steps to follow for tick removal and testing in order to avoid increasing the risk of infection. Time for Lyme, along with the LDA recently endowed the Lyme and tick-borne disease research center at Columbia University Medical Center in New York City.

"There is widespread confusion about what to do after ticks are found,"

Ms. Siciliano said. "How should they be removed? Should you save the tick for testing? Should a doctor be called?"

"With greater awareness about the proper steps that should be taken, potential severe symptoms of Lyme disease can be prevented."

Time for Lyme offers the following do's and don'ts for tick removal:

1. Don't squeeze or twist the body of the tick. Squeezing the tick, especially with your fingers, potentially can only force harmful bacteria from the midgut of the tick into your skin. Other methods, such as applying a hot match or petroleum jelly to the tick, also can cause the tick to deposit more bacteria — carrying liquid into the wound.
2. Do use fine-point tweezers to grasp the tick as close as possible to the place of attachment so that you can remove all parts of the tick, including the head. Time for Lyme offers Red Cross tick removal kits that include tweezers with an attached magnifying glass that offer even better precision when removing ticks.
3. Don't throw the tick away, rather take the tick for testing. Lyme disease is becoming more and more widespread, traveling by migratory birds and through an increasing deer population. Additionally ticks are hard to kill so to use careful techniques in handling the tick, so they are free to infect other individuals.
4. Do save the tick by storing it in a small container or zip locked plastic bag. You and/or your physician may want to have the tick tested for Lyme, especially if you develop characteristic symptoms of Lyme disease. Testing the tick is an important piece of information in diagnosing Lyme disease.
5. Do monitor the tick bite as well as your general health for signs of Lyme disease following the infection. The most common and identifiable symptoms include an expanding red rash around the site of infection and irritation at the bite site. However, many other symptoms may signify a problem, including fever, headache, chills, stiff neck or back, and muscle or joint aches. Contact your doctor so that consideration of antibiotic treatment can begin after finding an attached tick.
6. Do remove ticks from your pets. If you see a tick on your pet and it is crawling, use adhesive tape to adhere the tick and fold the tick into the adhesive in order to suffocate it. Do this only if the tick is moving. If it is burrowed into the pet's skin, remove it with a fine-point tweezers.

Tick bites can be a dangerous and scary aspect of the otherwise blissful months of summer. But with the proper prevention and treatment of tick bites, Time for Lyme believes that you can enjoy a carefree summer. The best way to prevent Lyme disease is to understand how to prevent tick bites, inspect for ticks and remove them without risking further infection. Time for Lyme's main goal is to inform the public about these steps so that summer can be a happy time for everyone.

More information is available at Timeforlyme.org.

