

Lyme-carrying ticks leave lasting effects

By Mary Ann Ebner

Chronic fatigue, joint pain and the loss of the ability to concentrate are among the challenges faced by some people with Lyme, a bacterial infection delivered by the bite of an infected deer tick.

George Muser, who lives on Mountain Road in Cornwall-on-Hudson, didn't realize he'd been bitten by an infected tick when he started experiencing some symptoms of Lyme disease.

"I was feeling like I was at the end of my rope," he said. "There was a period of time when symptoms crept up on me. It was affecting me emotionally and it was frightening. My doctor was very smart though. He gave me antibiotics right away."

Muser was tested and treated for Lyme disease a second time. He recovered, but admits there's always a chance of encountering another carrier. "Very likely, it was in my own back yard that I was bitten," he says. "We get deer by the dozens and we have fruit trees and Palisades Park behind us here."

With the arrival of warmer weather comes a busy season for ticks. They feed on blood – from us and our pets. Their likelihood to transmit the most common infectious diseases including



The deer tick (*Ixodes scapularis*) is pictured on a centimeter scale in a photo provided by the Orange County Department of Health. From left to right: adult female, adult male, nymph, larva.

Ehrlichiosis, Babesiosis and Lyme, is now at its peak.

According to the Orange County Department of Health, most infections of Lyme disease occur during summer months. Mary Wickes, the department's senior public health educator, stresses the importance of disease prevention by inspecting for ticks, whether you're hiking in the hills or gardening in your yard.

"The most important things to do," Wickes says, "are daily tick checks. We don't want people to be frightened by this but to be smarter than the tick. We need to be outside exercising and having fun but taking a bath or shower every day is the time to check for ticks."

Walter Weigel, store manager of Eastern Mountain Sports in Poughkeepsie, lives to spend time outdoors.

When he's not working, he's usually camping, mountain biking or hiking. He keeps a busy schedule, but he's never too busy for a tick check. He's been treated for Lyme disease and doesn't want to risk it again.

"When I came down with Lyme disease," Weigel said, "I was adamant that I didn't have it. My doctor broke the news to me and we did the treatment. But I've never been the same. Even after I went through the antibiotics, six months later, I didn't have the strength to hike."

Now, Weigel checks for ticks religiously. "We have to

take preventive measures,” Weigel said. “I kid you not, I check myself for ticks with mirrors.”

Though Weigel has come a long way since he felt like he had the flu for six months in 2002, he still experiences problems from Lyme. “I don’t feel like I’m the same person as before,” he said. “My energy levels don’t seem to be what they should be. After having Lyme, any day of the week, I can curl up on the floor and fall asleep in five minutes. It’s my own observation but I warn people to check for ticks because it’s just not worth the down time spent dealing with Lyme disease.”

Bushes, brush, woods and tall grasses make great homes for ticks. So it’s natural for gardeners, hikers and kids who play outdoors to run a high risk of becoming targets.

When pediatrician Richard Bickel moved to the Hudson Valley in 2005, he had no experience treating Lyme. Now, he has seen his share of tick-related cases. “We had one kid who had no known tick bite,” Dr. Bickel said, “but his knee was red and swollen.” The boy was treated for early Lyme arthritis.

“The nymphs are searching for blood meals,” Dr. Bickel said, “and they are tiny ticks. They are going to try to embed, so prior prevention is key.”

Patricia Chouairi of Cornwall vigilantly checks her school-age sons for ticks after their outdoor play in wooded areas. But she was

surprised when she discovered a tick on the back of her knee. “I had just finished mowing the lawn and gardening,” Mrs. Chouairi said. “I spotted the tick so I caught it early. I saw my physician the next day and reviewed my options. I can take a Lyme disease test in three to four weeks, if I choose, and I will continue to watch for signs of Lyme.”

Early signs of Lyme can present as a rash around the tick bite, joint aches and pain or flu-like symptoms. The disease also poses potential neurological complications, which are difficult to treat. If a tick is not engorged, it probably wasn’t attached too long. But in some cases, even embedded ticks go unnoticed.

“Often, people do not even feel a tick bite,” Wickes said. “And because there are so many kinds of ticks in Orange County, residents need to be cautious all summer.”

If you find a tick attached to your skin, don’t panic. Catching a tick shortly after it attaches and removing it carefully with tweezers can minimize problems. And to be safest, after removal, disinfect the site of a tick bite with rubbing alcohol or hydrogen peroxide. Not all deer ticks are infected with the bacteria that cause concern. But left unchecked, an infected tick attached longer than 24-36 hours stands the greatest risk of passing on tick-borne diseases.

Hikers at all skill levels should wear socks, fully-

closed footwear and light-colored long sleeves and long pants (to more easily reveal the presence of ticks).

The Orange County Department of Health wants to help you protect yourself from getting Lyme disease. To learn more about prevention plans and protective measures, call the voice mailbox of Mary Wickes at 568-5256. Leave your name and address. She will send shower cards, step-by-step tick removal, disinfection and storage directions, and a bookmark magnifier. The magnifiers are useful in identifying nymphs, ticks about the size of a poppy seed. With the help of the magnifiers, if you see little legs moving, you can be sure you’re removing a tick and not a speck of dirt, a freckle or mole.
