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OUTDOORS

Tips to reduce exposure to ticks



The deer tick is known for spreading Lyme disease and other tick-borne illnesses. Credit: Associated Press

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By *Paul A. Smith* of the *Journal Sentinel*

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2

As spring advances across Wisconsin and an increasing number of people venture outdoors to enjoy recreation opportunities, state officials are reminding the public to take steps to reduce exposure to ticks.

Ticks can pass a variety of diseases to humans and pets, including Lyme disease, babesiosis, ehrlichiosis, anaplasmosis, and spotted fever rickettsiosis.

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Lyme disease is the highest reported tick-borne illness in Wisconsin, but numbers for the other conditions are increasing, according to the Wisconsin Department of Health Services.

In 2014, the most recent full-year data available, 984 Lyme disease cases were confirmed in Wisconsin, according to the Department of Health Services.

All tick species can infect humans, but the deer or black-legged tick is especially concerning. Ticks have three life-cycle stages: larva, nymph and adult. The animals are most active during the nymph (immature) stage, which runs from about mid-May to mid-July.

In 2014, Lyme disease peaked in July (320), followed by June (254), August (115) and May (85). The statewide incidence rate was 17.1 per 100,000 residents, according to state health officials.

Tick activity tends to be highest in warmer months, but it can be found 12 months of the year in Wisconsin.

Spring turkey hunters, hikers, campers and anyone else venturing into the woods and fields should be vigilant for ticks, according to health officials.

Although effective therapies for Lyme disease and other tick-borne diseases exist, primary prevention of infection remains the best approach.

The Department of Entomology at UW-Madison has compiled the following recommendations to minimize the chance of a tick bite:

- Avoid known or suspected tick-infested areas, especially during the warmer months in Wisconsin.
- Walk in the center of mowed or cleared trails.
- Avoid walking through wooded and brushy areas with leaf litter and avoid brushing up against vegetation and tall grass.
- Use insect repellents that contain at least 20-50% DEET (N, N-Diethyl-m-toluamide) on exposed skin or clothing. The chemical may cause

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- Apply products that contain 0.5% permethrin on clothing. Permethrin cannot be applied directly to the skin. It should be applied to clothing and allowed to dry before the clothes are worn. Permethrin is an insecticide and kills ticks on contact. Treat clothing and gear, including boots, pants, socks and tents. Clothing pre-treated with permethrin are available and have been demonstrated to be effective against ticks in several studies.
- Wear light-colored clothing which makes it easier to spot ticks. Long-sleeved shirts and long pants are best.
- Tuck your pants into the top of your socks or boots, to create a "tick barrier" which can make it more difficult for ticks to get access to your skin and bite or attach.
- Bathe or shower as soon as possible after coming indoors (preferably within two hours) to more easily find ticks that are crawling on you.
- Conduct a thorough full-body tick check using a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body or have someone assist you to check your scalp or other hard to view areas on your body after returning from known or potentially tick-inhabited areas. Parents should thoroughly inspect their children for ticks under the arms, in and around the ears, the neck area, inside the belly button, behind the knees, between the legs, around the waist, and especially in their hair and scalp area.
- Examine gear and pets. Ticks can hitch a ride hitch into the home on clothing and pets, then attach to a human later, so carefully examine pets, coats, tents and backpacks.
- Tumble clothes in a dryer on high heat for 60 minutes to kill remaining ticks.

**About Paul A. Smith**

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