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WHY YOU SHOULD BE WORRIED ABOUT LYME DISEASE

BY ERIN O'DONNELL

The weather is warming up, and soon your kids will be playing outdoors. But it's not all fun and games: From April

through October, Lyme disease is a real threat to families across the U.S. In fact, reports of this bacterial illness have tripled since 1990. The good news is there are steps you can take to protect your child from tick bites. Read on for the six key facts you need to know.

1 TICKS CAN BE BIG TROUBLE. Humans catch Lyme disease from deer ticks that have fed on animals infected with the bacterium. Although white-tailed deer are common hosts, ticks also feed on mammals like white-footed mice. And ticks are easy to miss: As larvae, they're the size of a pencil point; adults are the size of a sesame seed.

"Contrary to myth, ticks don't jump," says Felicia Keesing, Ph.D., an associate professor of biology at Bard College, in Annandale-on-Hudson, New York. Instead, they live on shrubs, and latch onto whatever brushes by. Once attached, the tick buries its mouth in the skin and feeds on blood, potentially passing on the disease (not all ticks are infected).

2 YOUR BACKYARD MAY BE A BREEDING GROUND. Researchers think the number of Lyme cases is climbing because of the way neighborhoods are set up now. Suburban sprawl has fragmented the forests where deer and white-footed mice live, driving them from their habitats and into our backyards. And while the risk of encountering infected ticks is highest in the Northeast, the disease has been reported in every state except Montana.

3 YOU CAN STOP TICKS BEFORE THEY STICK. To protect against bites, dress kids in light-colored clothes (so dark ticks are visible), pants, socks, shoes, and long sleeves.



Also consider using insect repellent that contains DEET. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) now says it's safe to use products with up to 30 percent DEET on children. The AAP also cautions that you should never use DEET on a child younger than 2 months, that you shouldn't put it on a child's hands or face, and you shouldn't apply it more than once daily.

4 CHECKING FOR BUGS IS EASY.

During tick season, check your child—and pets—for ticks daily. Watch for spots that look like freckles, and focus on warm, moist areas where ticks hide: the groin, armpits, and hairline.

If you find a tick, don't fret. If the bug is infected, it takes 36 to 48 hours to transmit the bacterium. If you're checking daily, the tick probably hasn't been attached for that long. And even in areas where Lyme disease is rampant, there's only a 2 to 3 percent risk that people with a bite will develop the disease, says Eugene D. Shapiro, M.D., a professor of pediatrics and epidemiology at the Yale University School of Medicine, in New Haven, Connecticut.

5 LYME IS DIFFICULT TO DIAGNOSE.

A child with the disease usually develops a rash seven to 14 days after her encounter with a tick. Sometimes it's the classic round bull's-eye rash, but frequently it doesn't take that shape. One

thing is certain: It will linger. "If it's gone in two days without treatment, it's not Lyme," Dr. Shapiro says.

Since an estimated 20 percent of bite victims don't get any rash, watch for other symptoms, including headache, joint swelling, fever, muscle pain, and fatigue. These symptoms can look like a 24-hour virus, but they don't go away, says Barbara Stechenberg, M.D., director of pediatric infectious diseases at Bay State Medical Center Children's Hospital, in Springfield, Massachusetts. If symptoms continue for more than two days, see a doctor.

One way to find out whether your child has Lyme is to get a blood test that may determine whether the body has developed antibodies to the disease. But the antibodies can't be detected until three or four weeks after the bite, and the tests are often inaccurate. That's why your doctor may prescribe medication immediately if he suspects Lyme.

6 ANTIBIOTICS ARE THE BEST.

Pediatricians usually prescribe a 21-day course of antibiotics, which often wipes out the bacteria. In some cases, a longer course may be needed.

Once your child is Lyme-free, don't stop checking for ticks, because he could be exposed again. "It's natural to be nervous," Dr. Keesing says. "But you need to remember that thorough tick checks really do work." □

HOW TO REMOVE A TICK



- 1 Using a pair of tweezers, grasp the tick by the head or mouth. Don't burn it off with a match or use nail polish remover or petroleum jelly. These can cause the tick to release more bacteria.**
- 2 Pull firmly and steadily outward. Don't twist the tick as you pull. If parts of the head remain behind, they'll fall out on their own.**
- 3 Clean the bite with disinfectant, and wash your hands thoroughly.**
- 4 Watch the site for several weeks, and look for symptoms of Lyme disease. Experts stress that it's not necessary to have the tick analyzed, but if it would make you feel better, put the tick in a zipper-top bag and call your local health department for information.**