

Lyme Disease & You

What is it?



Lyme disease is a rare infection that can be spread to humans through a tick bite. It can result in an inflammatory disorder that may affect many systems in the body including the joints, heart and brain.

Lyme disease is caused by infection with a type of bacteria called a spirochete. It can be spread to humans through a tick bite. Here's the catch: the tick must remain attached to the skin for 24-36 hours to transmit the infection. Only about 1% of people who get tick bites will become infected.

Anyone can get Lyme disease. The ticks that spread Lyme disease are found across the U.S. and Canada but they are most widespread in the eastern regions.



Protect yourself - look for tick bites

Prevention is the best strategy when it comes to Lyme disease. If you've been in an area known to have ticks, or where Lyme disease is endemic, it is very important to look for ticks all over your body. Take a shower when you come out of the woods to knock any ticks off. Take a close look at your clothes and skin – ticks like to bite around sweaty areas like the armpits, beltline, back of the knees, groin and scalp. Ticks can be tiny so look carefully and remove them immediately if you spot any.

What is it going to do to me?



In about 8 out of 10 people, a rash is the first symptom of Lyme disease. The rash sometimes looks like a bull's eye. Other symptoms are a lot like having the flu, such as loss of appetite, fatigue, headaches, sore muscles and joints, enlarged lymph nodes, and sometimes fever.

If the disease progresses for several months without treatment, the infection can reach the blood and affect other body systems. Lyme disease becomes more serious if this happens. If infection reaches the brain and nervous system, meningitis, Bell's palsy, and loss of sensation or motor function can happen. The heart can also be a target for Lyme disease. Infection of the heart can cause dizziness, light-headedness, shortness of breath, chest pain and palpitations.

During the late stages of Lyme disease, arthritis can cause sore joints. Lyme arthritis can either be persistent and ache all the time or flare up and settle back down. If left untreated, the arthritis can become chronic and damage the joint cartilage.

Post-Lyme disease syndrome can manifest as fibromyalgia, which is a condition involving chronic fatigue and pain.

Visit RheumInfo.com



RheumInfo.com is a free educational website where you can learn more about Lyme disease and its treatment. The website is operated by Dr. Andy Thompson, a rheumatologist.

What can I do about it?



Early treatment of Lyme disease is vital. Your treatment will depend on the stage of your disease and when it's diagnosed.

In the early stages (rash and/or flu symptoms), oral antibiotics are the usual treatment. Usually oral antibiotics are taken for 10-21 days. Non-prescription pain relievers such as acetaminophen (Tylenol) or non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs) can help relieve symptoms of achiness, fever and joint pain.

Oral antibiotics and NSAIDs are also helpful for Lyme arthritis. If joint pain is severe, an oral corticosteroid might be considered. Antibiotics are generally not effective for post-Lyme syndrome and fibromyalgia.

When Lyme disease is more advanced and affects the nervous system or the heart, most people need to be admitted to the hospital. In this case, antibiotics are given by intravenous infusion for 10 days and up to 1 month.

Here are some other recommendations:

- **Prevent infection by checking your body all over for ticks and remove any that are found**
- **Learn as much as you can about the disease**
- **Attend your medical appointments regularly**
- **Learn about the medications used to treat Lyme disease**