



Tick Season is Here

Don't let it stop you from going outdoors.

By Elizabeth Mack

Spring has sprung – which means ticks will surely follow. May, June and July are peak season months for ticks in Nebraska – a fact that may unnecessarily keep some people from enjoying the great outdoors. Why? Lyme disease.

The issue of Lyme disease in Nebraska is still pretty muddy, causes great confusion and is probably overblown, according to Wayne Kramer, the former medical entomologist and lead investigator of vector-borne diseases for the Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services who is currently an Associate Professor of Entomology at Louisiana State University. “Nebraska doesn’t have the classic tick and bacteria combination of true Lyme disease,” said Kramer.

True Lyme disease comes from the bacteria, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, and the tick, *Ixodes scapularis*. The majority of all true human Lyme cases (90 to 95 percent) come from the northeast Atlantic region (the disease’s name comes from Lyme, Connecticut, where it was originally identified) as well as Minnesota and Wisconsin.

Southeastern Nebraska does, however, have the lone star tick (*Amblyomma americanum*) and *Borrelia lonestar*, a

bacteria that can cause a disease with similar, Lyme-like symptoms (bull’s eye rash, fever, aches) that is much less severe. The same antibiotic treatments for both diseases are extremely effective when administered in the early stages.

South of the Platte River, from Omaha to the Republican City area, is the main region in Nebraska associated with the lone star tick (named for the white “star” on its back), partially because deer, an important host for this species of tick, are abundant in this area. Even though deer are also abundant in other parts of the state, Kramer explained, lone star ticks are not.

However, Kramer noted, even though the lone star tick has traditionally only been found in southeastern Nebraska as well as the southern tier of Iowa, Illinois and Indiana, the species has gradually been creeping north over the last 15-20 years: “It’s being found in places where it didn’t use to occur.”

Although Lyme disease is often reported by those with its symptoms, research on it has been limited and diagnosis often difficult. A vaccine used to be available, but never really caught on and was removed from the market. Lyme disease differs from

other vector-borne diseases because the diagnosis is just not very accurate, said Kramer: “A lot of people with Lyme disease are not diagnosed, and a lot of people who probably don’t have Lyme disease are told they do. And even though there are blood tests,

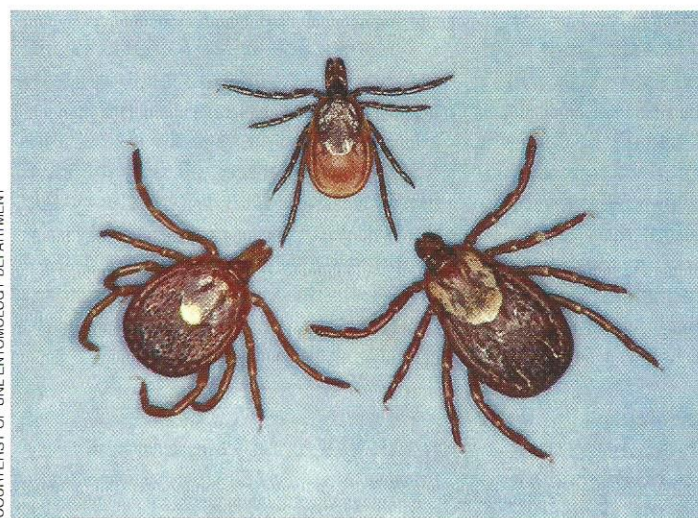
Prevention

- Wear light-colored clothing when outdoors.
- Wear long sleeves and tuck pant-legs into socks.
- Use insect repellent containing DEET; the more natural oil of lemon eucalyptus has also been found to be effective.
- Check all parts of body that bend: behind knees; underarms; behind ears and any place where elastic is tight on skin.
- Shower immediately after returning from grassy or woody areas.
- If a tick is found, remove gently with tweezers; do not try to burn off.
- If a bull’s eye rash develops, seek medical treatment.

they aren’t always accurate. We have gotten used to expecting a 100 percent accurate diagnostic test for everything, but Lyme disease is one of those diseases where the diagnosis is sometimes impossible to make.”

Kramer believes that when Lyme is reported (often inaccurately) and publicized, the result is often confusion and sometimes even panic. It’s important to note, he said, that if diagnosed in the early stages when the rash first develops, Lyme disease (and its milder, Nebraska version) responds very well to antibiotic therapy, though symptoms could worsen if left untreated. And the chances of contracting Lyme-type diseases in Nebraska remains slim: Compared to the northeastern U.S., where the more serious Lyme disease exists and cases number in the thousands (well over 20,000 cases in eight northeastern Atlantic states in 2008), Nebraska had only eight confirmed cases, though Kramer believes even that number may be inaccurate.

So don’t let the fear of Lyme disease keep you inside this summer. With the proper precautions, ticks shouldn’t take a bite out of your outdoor fun. ■



Left: Lone star tick; Top: Deer tick; Right: Dog or wood tick.

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