

Lyme Disease

“from Nurse Karen” Immanuel Lutheran Church

“But let all who take refuge in you be glad; let them ever sing for joy. Spread your protection over them, that those who love your name may rejoice in you.” Psalm 5:11

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection caused by the bite of an infected tick. The bacteria can live in mice or deer, and are carried by a tick that bites an infected animal (mice and deer) and then bites a human. This is the only way a person can contract the disease, as it is not contagious from one person to another. The discovery of this condition occurred in 1975 when a large group of mothers in Lyme, Connecticut alerted researchers that their children had been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis. It was then discovered that all these children were in fact, infected with a bacteria called *Borrelia burgdorferi*. Thus the name we know it as: Lyme Disease.

Ticks live in grass and bushes, and attach themselves to deer or people who may pass by. While infected ticks are found all over the United States, the hardest hit areas are the Northeast, upper Midwest, and Pacific coastal areas. The last statistics reported by the Center for Disease Control show New York, Pennsylvania, and New Mexico as having the largest number of reported cases. The total number of cases for the entire country in 2006 was just under 20,000.

Symptoms usually occur in three stages, but can certainly vary from person to person. The first symptom is usually a rash that resembles a target, or “bull’s eye”. It occurs within 3-30 days after the bite, and has a red spot in the middle, clear skin around that, and then a solid ring of redness that grows to about 12 inches across. This bull’s eye usually disappears in about a month. If the condition remains untreated, several days to weeks later, there may also be flu like symptoms, such as fever, muscle aches, and swollen lymph nodes. This second stage has a wide range of symptoms, including an irregular heart beat, paralysis of one or both sides of the face (Bell’s palsy), numbness and tingling in the legs and arms, swelling and pain in the large joints (especially the knees), and severe headaches and neck stiffness indicative of meningitis. The last stage generally appears anytime from weeks to years later, and can include arthritis with severe pain and swelling, and difficulty with short term memory and concentration.

Lyme disease can be easily diagnosed if the patient develops a Bull’s eye rash, and verifies a possible exposure to ticks. In this case, no laboratory test is needed or recommended, as lab tests are not accurate until later in the disease. After about a month, the body has developed antibodies to the bacteria, and these can be verified with

a blood test. If no rash was seen, diagnosis is made based on symptoms and lab results.

Luckily, treatment is relatively easy, and involves antibiotic treatment for about 2-4 weeks. As with any antibiotic treatment, it is very important that the entire course of antibiotics be taken as prescribed to be effective.

The best defense against Lyme disease is **prevention**. Ticks thrive in humid, woody areas, so create areas near your homes and parks that are sunny and dry. Discourage deer from entering your yard by not feeding them. There are pesticides that are effective against ticks. Always follow directions closely, or hire a professional company to apply pesticides. Prevention is the most important step we can take for ourselves and for our children, while recognizing the signs of Lyme disease is equally important.

When walking in the woods, stay toward the middle of the trail, away from bushy or leaf filled areas. Use an insect repellent with 20%-30% DEET on clothing and any exposed skin. Wear long pants and sleeves, and tuck pants into socks. Light colored clothes help you spot any ticks. Permethrin can be found at camping stores, and kills ticks on contact! However, it can only be applied to shoes and clothing; never on the skin.

Check yourself and your kids for ticks before going inside the house. Ticks like to bite behind the ears and knees, on the back of the neck, and in armpits and groins. Bathe and shampoo to be sure no ticks are missed. There is only one safe way to remove a tick. Do not squeeze or twist the tick, and don’t try to burn or smother it. Whenever a tick is found, grasp it firmly at its head with tweezers and pull it straight out. Wipe the skin with alcohol, and wash your hands. If you remove a tick within 24 hours of it of attaching itself to you, the chances of being infected are **extremely small**.

Take some sensible precautions; enjoy the beautiful outdoors that God has provided for us.

More info at: www.kidshealth.com & www.aldf.com Blessings, Nurse Karen