

Tick Bites & Lyme Disease Advice

What are ticks?

Ticks are small creatures related to spiders and mites that feed on the blood of animals and sometimes people. Ticks can survive in many places but prefer slightly moist, shady areas such as bracken, bushes and leaf litter. They can be found in both long and short grass. Ticks can't jump or fly, so they have to wait until an animal (or human) brushes past to attach to their skin. The tick population peaks between late spring and autumn (April to October).

What do they look like?

Tick nymphs or larvae are about the size of a pin head, flat in shape and ranging in colour from brown to black. Adult ticks are slightly bigger and look like small spiders. When feeding, a tick's body will fill with blood and swell to the size of a match head, becoming purple, blue-grey or pink in colour.

What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease or Lyme borreliosis, is a bacterial infection spread by infected ticks. Human infection is uncommon, because only a small proportion of ticks have the infection. However, those ticks that may carry Lyme disease are common in the countryside, especially woodlands and parks with deer, such as Richmond Park and Bushy Park.

What are the symptoms?

The early symptoms of Lyme disease develop between 3 to 32 days after receiving a bite from an infected tick. The first sign is often a pink or red rash around the bite site. The rash can gradually spread to form a large circle up to 50cm (20inches) in diameter, which can be faint or difficult to see on darker skins. Other symptoms can develop, including flu-like symptoms such as headaches, chills, tiredness, muscle pains, joint aches and fever. More serious complications may develop weeks or months after an infected bite is untreated. These include temporary facial paralysis, pain, weakness or loss of sensation in the arms, legs or trunk and arthritis. Symptoms resolve quickly with antibiotic treatment. Early recognition and treatment is important and will help to prevent the more serious complications from developing.

How to minimise risk of infection

The best precaution is to avoid being bitten so follow the adjacent prevention tips. Tick bites don't hurt, so they can easily go unnoticed. When you get home check your whole body for ticks, paying particular attention to your head, neck, skin folds (armpits, groin, backs of knees and waist) and your clothes. Be sure to check along the hairline and neck area, particularly in young children.

What to do if bitten

Remove the tick as soon as possible. Using fine pointed tweezers or a tick-removal tool, grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible. To detach a tick, pull upwards firmly and steadily, without jerking or twisting. Don't squeeze or crush the tick's body as this could increase the risk of infection by prompting the tick to regurgitate saliva into the bite wound. After removal of the tick, apply an antiseptic to the bite site. Don't use petroleum jelly, liquid solutions, freeze or burn the tick. After tick removal, continue to check the bite site over the subsequent month, looking for signs of increased redness or rash. Consult your doctor if any symptoms develop.