

It's only March, but several states are reporting early sightings of ticks. I know that at my house we have already seen them. For us this is a full month earlier than normal. Experts are predicting a more abundant tick season which could lead to a rise in Lyme disease infection.

For pet owners, we are all familiar with the little buggers and know what the risks are should they adhere to either our pets or ourselves. The biggest risk is Lyme disease. This is often hard to diagnose and tricky to treat. Physicians aren't as familiar with the disease as your vet would be, but since your vet can't treat humans, symptoms of Lyme disease often fall through the cracks. Symptoms range from headache, muscle aches, to more serious and long term complications affecting our brain, nerves, joints and muscles. Early diagnosis is essential for any tick borne illness. Lyme is often identified by an expanding rash that looks like a bull's eye, but there are cases where it has not shown up for weeks.

The CDC states that between 1992 and 2010 reported cases of Lyme disease doubled, which is alarming enough but they also state that the actual undiagnosed cases may be 3 times higher. One of the reasons experts are telling us that this season will be worse is due to a lack of the white footed mouse which is caused by a shortage of acorns. This is called a perfect storm of ecological vents. An interesting fact I found while researching this article is that mice and not deer are the more abundant carriers of ticks (this is due to this mouse not being bothered by parasites). Ticks feed on mice and when the mice aren't available they will start to feed on other mammals.

The ticks you have to look out for are the nymphs. These usually appear between May through July but due to the mild winter they are obviously showing up to the party early. These nymphs are the ones responsible for spreading the majority of Lyme disease.

Here are some tips to keeping your pets and your selves tick free:

*Avoid tick infested areas. If you are hiking, keep yourself and your pets in the center of the trail. Ticks can drop unseen off of vegetation, such as shrubs, tall grass, etc. They prefer moist environments near wooded or grassy areas.*

*Use a repellent with 20% DEET or more. This can be used not only on skin, but also on clothing including your shoes. Nymphs live on the forest floor and can climb aboard via your feet.*

*Perform daily checks of yourself and your pets. If your pets have access to the outside then each time they come in you should check for ticks. Using a repellent is the most effective way of keeping these monsters off our pets. Check with your vet to see which would work best for your family.*

*If you have to be outside, then once you come in, head for the shower and perform a self-check using a mirror, being sure to check all of your body parts, including the under arms, belly button and ears. Toss clothes in the dryer on high heat to kill any ticks that might have found their way in.*

*If you find a tick, use a pair of fine pointed tweezers to remove it at the point of attachment. It is crucial to not squeeze the tick body as this can inject more potential pathogens to you or your pet. Wash the area with a mild soap and water. It is recommended that you place the tick in a jar of rubbing alcohol with the date written on the outside in case of future illness. The type of tick and location will be important.*

Best of luck to all for a tick free season.

Gina