Lyme Disease Update

No indications yet of Lyme disease increase in Muskoka

Huntsville Forester
By Roland Cilliers

MUSKOKA SUN - Earlier and hotter summers aren’t the only effect experts believe climate change will have on Muskoka. Lyme disease, spread through tick bites, is on the rise in Ontario. Warmer weather means potential habitat for the disease carrying tick could be expanding north into regions like Muskoka.

Currently Muskoka has a very small population of the blacklegged tick, formerly called the deer tick, and thus a small occurrence rate of Lyme disease. However, those travelling through the region should still take steps to protect themselves from this potentially debilitating illness. Ryan MacDougall, health protection supervisor with the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit, said if spending time in a forested area it would be wise to take basic precautions against tick bites.

“Very simple things like wearing closed-toed shoes and long pants – that’s just so the tick will attach to the clothing instead of skin. We recommend if people are in areas with ticks, or spending time in those areas, they would check themselves for ticks. You can also wear insect repellant, anything with deet will work,” said MacDougall.

Ticks attach themselves to people by climbing to the tips of tall grass or leaves and then waiting for an appropriate host to walk by. Ticks tend to occur in areas with tall grasses and bushes.

The blacklegged tick is typically seen in southern Ontario, but Muskoka is considered a borderline region. That means that while ticks can survive here it’s not very common. Jan McDonnell, natural heritage biologist with the Bracebridge office of the Ministry of Natural Resources, said she has not seen any reports that indicate an increase in the local tick population.

“The blacklegged tick is a teeny tiny little thing, barely bigger than a pencil dot,” said McDonnell.

The blacklegged tick is one of three types of tick you can find in Muskoka. The other two are the larger moose tick and wood tick. Those who avoid the forest have very little to fear from a tick bite. “You won’t really find them in an urban setting or on a lawn or anything like that. If you’re in a naturally vegetated area, like a forest or an area of the ticks’ more natural habitat, the potential is always there,” McDonnell said. Following a
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bite from a Lyme disease-carrying tick, it can take a significant amount of time for the disease’s symptoms to make themselves known. “If you’re bitten by a tick, it can take one to two weeks to show symptoms. If, in fact, you did come in contact with Lyme disease it basically has flu-like symptoms. They would be things like fevers, headaches, muscle aches, tiredness and pains,” MacDougall said. One common indicator of a Lyme-infected tick bite is a large, red bullseye-like rash. If not treated quickly enough, Lyme disease symptoms can become severe. The wide range of potential effects can include numbness in the limbs, reduction of short term memory, intense fatigue and even depression.

On the positive side of things, blacklegged ticks and Lyme disease cases are still very rare in Muskoka. MacDougall said they have not noted an increase in local cases of the disease. “On average, we see about zero to six cases a year,” said MacDougall, adding that includes people who may have been infected in other areas with a greater tick population. “We haven’t noticed an increase. We’re holding steady. There are a number of cases investigated each year, but we haven’t seen anything so far this season.”

For more information on ticks and Lyme disease visit the Simcoe-Muskoka District Health Unit website at www.simcoemuskokahealth.org.

What to do if you get bitten?

That's a deer tick. It's only about the size of a sesame seed and it might be carrying Lyme Disease, an illness that is becoming more and more common in Southern Ontario. Because Lyme Disease is relatively new to our area, doctors are often slow to diagnose it after a person has been infected.

The best policy is to check yourself, your kids and your dog for ticks after working or playing outside in the garden or in tall grassy or forested areas. Check everywhere, including under arms and in the groin. When you find a tick, remove it carefully with tweezers right next to the skin, so that no part of the tick remains in the body.
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The proper technique for tick removal includes the following:

- Use fine tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin surface as possible.
- Pull backwards gently but firmly, using an even, steady pressure. Do not jerk or twist.
- Do not squeeze, crush, or puncture the body of the tick, since its bodily fluids may contain infection-causing organisms.
- After removing the tick, wash the skin and hands thoroughly with soap and water.
- If any mouth parts of the tick remain in the skin, these should be left alone; they will be expelled on their own. Attempts to remove these parts may result in significant skin trauma.

The tick needs to be attached and feeding for 24 to 48 hours in order to transmit disease, so don't panic if you have to remove a tick, but make sure you do that check and get it before it has a chance to do the damage.

This is the classic "bulls-eye" rash that 80% of people develop if they have been infected with Lyme Disease. The other 20% of people may not get any rash at all. Early symptoms of the disease include feeling awful, debilitating fatigue and joint and muscle pain. Get yourself to a doctor if you suspect you might have Lyme Disease and insist on being taken seriously! The latter stages of the disease don't bear thinking about. You should leave the doctor's office with a script for antibiotics.
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