

## **Albertans warned to take precautions against Lyme disease**

May 20, 2010

Edmonton ... Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health is advising Albertans to take precautions against Lyme disease as ticks carrying the disease have been identified in three areas of the province.

Three ticks have tested positive for *Borrelia*, the bacteria that cause Lyme disease. The ticks were found on dogs in the Calgary, High River and Ardrossan areas, and submitted for testing by veterinarians. *Borrelia* was first identified in Alberta in 2007, in ticks found on dogs in the Stony Plain area. A bite by an infected tick can cause illness in people, wildlife and domestic animals.

"Lyme disease can be a serious condition if it's not detected early and left untreated," said Dr. Andre Corriveau, Alberta's Chief Medical Officer of Health. "We advise anyone who is spending time outdoors to take precautions against tick bites. Your best defense against Lyme disease is prevention. To avoid being bitten by ticks, use insect repellents and cover up when walking in tall grass, woods or brush." There have been 20 cases of human Lyme disease reported in Alberta from 1989 to 2009. The majority of cases have been linked to travel in the U.S. or Europe. Public health officials have not been able to confirm that any of the infections were acquired in Alberta. Infected ticks reported in 2007 were thought to be carried to Alberta by migratory birds, as neither the species of tick nor the bacteria had been seen here before.

"Alberta Agriculture and Rural Development operates a tick surveillance project that is looking to see if the ticks that carry Lyme disease are established in the province," says Dr. Gerald Hauer, Chief Provincial Veterinarian. "Ticks that carry Lyme disease have rarely been found in Alberta, and we are currently trying to get a better understanding of their presence."

Infection with Lyme disease normally occurs in the summer months from May to August. The disease is recognized as a circular, red rash starting at the tick bite 3 to 30 days after the bite occurs. The rash may be accompanied by fever, chills, headache, fatigue and swollen lymph glands. In some cases, Lyme disease results in neurological and muscular problems weeks or months after the original infection. More serious cases can lead to recurrent meningitis, heart problems and arthritis.

If you find a tick on your pet, contact your local veterinarian to remove it, so the tick can be identified and collected for testing. The veterinarian can treat the infection in pets or domestic animals.

For more information on Lyme disease, visit <http://www.health.alberta.ca/health-info/lyme-disease.html>, or <http://srd.alberta.ca/BioDiversityStewardship/WildlifeDiseases/documents/WDlymedisease.pdf>.

Anyone who suspects they have Lyme disease should contact HealthLink Alberta - in the Calgary-area at 403.943.LINK (5465); in the Edmonton-area at 780.408.LINK (5465) or, outside the local calling area, toll-free at 1.866.408.LINK (5465).

## Questions and answers about Lyme disease

Q: How is Lyme disease transmitted?

A: Lyme disease is a debilitating disease that can affect people, wildlife and domestic animals. Infection of humans with Lyme disease normally occurs during the summer months from May to August after a bite from a tick infected with Lyme-causing bacteria.

Ticks on migrating birds may also carry the bacteria and some common bird species are potential hosts for Lyme bacteria.

The disease is named after Lyme, Connecticut, where the first human outbreak in North America was recognized in 1975. Q: Can Lyme disease be treated? In the early stages of infection, Lyme disease can be treated with doxycycline or amoxicillin. Q: What if I find a tick embedded in my skin? Use tweezers to gently remove the tick's mouth - the part sticking into your skin. Apply steady pressure to pull the tick straight out without twisting or jerking it. Do not squash the tick, as it may inject the bacteria directly into your skin. Check the bite area for at least two weeks. If a red rash appears or other symptoms develop, seek medical attention. Q: What if I find a tick embedded in my pet? If you find a tick on your pet, contact your local veterinarian to remove it, so the tick can be identified and collected for testing. The veterinarian can treat the infection in pets or domestic animals. Q: How can I avoid Lyme disease? Use insect repellent containing DEET, and cover up as much as possible when walking in tall grass, brush or woods where ticks may be found. Wear a long-sleeved shirt, long pants, long socks, enclosed shoes or boots and a hat. Wear light colours, as ticks are dark and easier to see against a light background. Some ticks can be as small as a pin-head or freckle. Remove clothes and check your body thoroughly for ticks after being outdoors. Regularly check pets and children after they have been outside and carefully remove any ticks.

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