

# PUBLIC HEALTH FACT SHEET

## Tick Repellents

Massachusetts Department of Public Health (MDPH), 305 South Street, Jamaica Plain, MA 02130

### What is a tick repellent?

A tick repellent is a substance put on skin, clothing, or other surfaces which discourages ticks from crawling on that surface.

### Why should I use a tick repellent?

Ticks can spread germs that cause disease. Using a tick repellent can reduce your chances of being bitten by a tick and therefore reduce the risk that you will get one of these diseases.

### When should I use a tick repellent?

Use these products when you are outside and exposed to ticks. Ticks are usually found on plants near the ground in brushy, wooded or grassy places. They cannot fly. They can be active year round, depending on the temperature, but are most often a problem between April and October. Depending on where you live, you could get bitten by a tick in your own yard.

#### *Did you know?*

You don't have to be a hiker on Cape Cod to worry about ticks. Depending on where you live, you may be bitten in your own yard. There are lots of things you can do around your own yard to make it less inviting for ticks! Visit the MDPH Tickborne Disease Website at [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/lyme/lymehp.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/lyme/lymehp.htm) for suggestions.

### What kind of repellent should I use?

Different products work against different bugs. It is important to look at the "active ingredient" on the product label. Products with **DEET** (N,N-diethyl-m-toluamide) or **permethrin** are recommended for protection against ticks. Some repellents, such as picaridin or oil of lemon eucalyptus, have been found to provide protection against mosquitoes but have not been shown to work against ticks.

**DEET** is the active ingredient found in most repellent products. It can be used directly on exposed skin or on clothing. If you use it on your clothes, be aware that DEET can damage some synthetic fabrics such as acetate, rayon or spandex.

There are over 200 products containing DEET registered with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), ranging in concentration from 5% to 100% DEET. **Read the product label to determine the percentage of DEET included and how often it should be reapplied.** DEET products should not be used on infants under 2 months of age. Children older than two months should use concentrations of 30% or less. There is limited information available on how well and how long different concentrations of DEET work against ticks.

**Permethrin** products are intended for use on items such as clothing, shoes, bed nets and camping gear and should not be applied to skin. Apply the permethrin to your clothes before you put them on and follow the product's instructions.

## Do “natural” repellents work?

A number of plant-derived products are available for use as repellents. Limited information is available regarding how well these products work and how safe they are. The information that is available shows that these products do not work as well or as long as products like DEET or permethrin against ticks.

### Use these products wisely!

- ❖ Follow the instructions on the product label. If you have questions after reading the label, such as how many hours does the product work for, or if and how often it should be reapplied, contact the manufacturer.
- ❖ Don't use repellents under clothing.
- ❖ Don't use repellents on cuts or irritated skin.
- ❖ Don't use repellents near the mouth or eyes and use them sparingly around the ears. When using spray products, spray the repellent on your hands first, then apply it to your face.
- ❖ Use just enough repellent to lightly cover exposed skin and/or clothing. Putting on a larger amount does not make the product work any better.
- ❖ Don't let children handle the product. When using repellents on children, put some on your hands first, then apply it to the child. Don't put repellents on a child's hands.
- ❖ When you come inside, wash your skin and the clothes that had repellent on them.
- ❖ **If you develop a rash or other symptoms you think were caused by using one of these products, stop using it, wash the affected area with soap and water, and contact your doctor or local poison control center. If you go to the doctor, bring the product with you to show him or her.**

## Where can I get more information?

- **For more information on repellents (such as choosing the right product, using products on children or pregnant women, or detailed toxicology information),** contact the National Pesticide Information Center (NPIC) toll free at 1-800-858-7378 or online at [npic.orst.edu/wnv/pesticideinfo.htm#repellents](http://npic.orst.edu/wnv/pesticideinfo.htm#repellents).
- **For questions on health effects of pesticides,** contact the MDPH, Center for Environmental Health at 617-624-5757.
- **For questions on diseases spread by ticks,** contact the MDPH, Division of Epidemiology and Immunization at 617-983-6800 or online at [www.mass.gov/dph](http://www.mass.gov/dph). You may also contact your local Board of Health (listed in the telephone directory under “Government”).

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## Lyme Disease

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### What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is caused by bacteria (germs) that are spread by tiny, infected deer ticks. Both people and animals can have Lyme disease.

### Where do cases of Lyme disease occur?

In the United States, Lyme disease most commonly occurs in the Northeast and mid-Atlantic regions and in the upper Midwest. In Massachusetts, Lyme disease occurs throughout the state.

### How is Lyme disease spread?

Lyme disease is spread by the bite of an infected deer tick. The tick usually must be attached to a person for at least 24 hours before it can spread the germ. Deer ticks in Massachusetts can also carry the germs that cause babesiosis and human granulocytic anaplasmosis (also known as human granulocytic ehrlichiosis). Deer ticks are capable of spreading more than one type of germ in a single bite.

### When can I get Lyme disease?

Lyme disease can occur during any time of the year. The bacteria that cause Lyme disease are spread by infected deer ticks. Young ticks (nymphs) are most active during the warm weather months between May and July. Adult ticks are most active during the fall and spring but may also be out searching for a host any time that winter temperatures are above freezing.

### How soon do symptoms of Lyme disease appear after a tick bite?

Symptoms of early Lyme disease, described below, usually begin to appear from 3 to 30 days after being bitten by an infected tick. If untreated, symptoms of late Lyme disease may occur from weeks to years after the initial infection.

### What are the symptoms of Lyme disease?

**Early stage (days to weeks):** The most common early symptom is a rash (erythema migrans) where the tick was attached. It often, but not always, starts as a small red area that spreads outward, clearing up in the center so it looks like a donut. Flu-like symptoms, such as fever, headache, stiff neck, sore and aching muscles and joints, fatigue and swollen glands may also occur.

Even though these symptoms may go away by themselves, without medical treatment, some people will get the rash again in other places on their bodies, and many will experience more serious problems. ***Treatment during the early stage prevents later, more serious problems.***

**Later stages (weeks to years):** If untreated, people with Lyme disease can develop late-stage symptoms even if they never had a rash. The joints, nervous system and heart are most commonly affected.

- About 60% of people with untreated Lyme disease get arthritis in their knees, elbows and/or wrists. The arthritis can move from joint to joint and become chronic.
- Many people who don't get treatment develop nervous system problems. These problems include meningitis (an inflammation of the membranes covering the brain and spinal cord), facial weakness (Bell's palsy) or other problems with nerves of the head, and weakness or pain (or both) in the hands, arms, feet and/or legs. These symptoms can last for months, often shifting between mild and severe.
- The heart also can be affected in Lyme disease, with slowing down of the heart rate and fainting. The effect on the heart can be early or late.

## Is there treatment for Lyme disease?

People who are diagnosed with Lyme disease can be treated with antibiotics. **Prompt treatment during the early stage of the disease prevents later, more serious problems.**

## What can I do to lower my chances of getting Lyme disease, or any other disease, from ticks?

**Prevention begins with you!** Take steps to reduce your chances of being bitten by any tick. Ticks are most active during warm weather, generally late spring through fall. However, ticks can be out any time that temperatures are above freezing. Ticks cling to vegetation and are most numerous in brushy, wooded or grassy habitats. They are not found on open, sandy beaches, but may be found in grassy dune areas. When you are outside in an area likely to have ticks (e.g. brushy, wooded or grassy places), follow these simple steps to protect yourself and your loved ones:

- Use a repellent with **DEET** (the chemical N-N-diethyl-meta-toluamide) or **permethrin** according to the instructions given on the product label. DEET products should not be used on infants under two months of age and should be used in concentrations of 30% or less on older children. Permethrin products are intended for use on items such as clothing, shoes, bed nets and camping gear, and should not be applied to skin. More information on choosing a repellent and how to use repellents safely is included in the MDPH Public Health Fact Sheet on Tick Repellents at [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/factsheets/factsheets.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/factsheets/factsheets.htm). If you can't go online, contact the MDPH at (617) 983-6800 for a hard copy.
- Wear long, light-colored pants tucked into your socks or boots, and a long-sleeved shirt. This may be difficult to do when the weather is hot, but it will help keep ticks away from your skin and help you spot a tick on your clothing faster.
- Stay on cleared trails when walking or hiking, avoiding the edge habitat where ticks are likely to be.
- Talk to your veterinarian about tick control options (tick collars, repellents) for your pets.

### *Did you know?*

You don't have to be a hiker on Cape Cod to worry about ticks. In Massachusetts, you may be bitten in your own backyard. There are lots of things you can do around your own backyard to make it less inviting for ticks! Visit the MDPH Tickborne Disease Website at [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/lyme/lymehp.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/epii/lyme/lymehp.htm) for suggestions.



### **After spending time in an area likely to have ticks, check yourself, your children and pets for ticks.**

Young ticks, called nymphs, are the size of a poppy seed. Adult deer ticks are the size of a sesame seed. Both nymph and adult deer ticks can spread the bacteria that cause Lyme disease; however, nymphs are of more concern. They are aggressive feeders and so tiny that it can be difficult to see them on the body, unless you are looking carefully. When doing a tick check, remember that ticks like places that are warm and moist. Always check the back of the knees, armpits, groin, scalp, back of the neck and behind the ears. If you find a tick attached to your body, remove it as soon as possible using a fine-point tweezers. Do not squeeze or twist the tick's body, but grasp it close to your skin and pull straight out with steady pressure.

**Know the symptoms of Lyme disease** as described in this fact sheet. If you have been someplace likely to have ticks and you develop symptoms of Lyme disease, or any other disease carried by ticks, see your health care provider right away.

## Where can I get more information?

- **For questions about your own health**, contact your doctor, nurse, or health care clinic.
- **For questions about Lyme disease or other diseases spread by ticks**, contact the MDPH at (617) 983-6800 or toll free at (888) 658-2850 or online at <http://www.mass.gov/dph>. You may also contact your local Board of Health (listed in the telephone directory under "Government").
- **For questions about tick repellents**, read the MDPH Public Health Fact Sheet on Tick Repellents at [www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/factsheets/factsheets.htm](http://www.mass.gov/dph/cdc/factsheets/factsheets.htm). If you can't go online, you may ask for hard copies of MDPH fact sheets by calling the MDPH number above.