

Ebel: Lyme Disease Cases on the Rise in Licking County

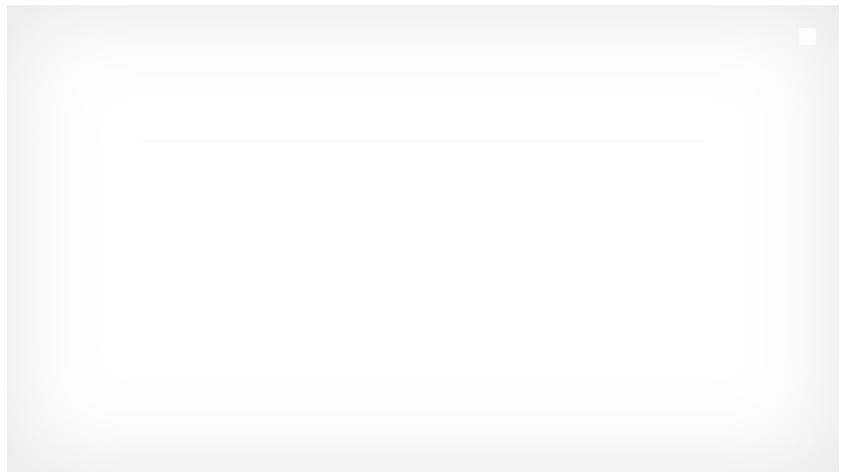
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Year-to-date, there have been 45 cases of Lyme disease reported to the Licking County Health Department. This is nearly three times as many cases than at this point last year—with 16 reported by July 2018. It is more than double the total for all of 2018 when there were 21 total reported cases.

Black-legged ticks, which have spread across Ohio in recent years, can carry the bacteria responsible for causing Lyme. Typical symptoms include fever, headache, fatigue, and a characteristic “bull’s-eye” skin rash. Most cases of Lyme disease can be treated successfully with a few weeks of antibiotics. If left untreated, the infection can spread to joints, the heart, and the nervous system.

There is some debate about why the number of Lyme cases continues to grow in Ohio. The spread of black-legged ticks certainly is key, but where the ticks have been established, like in Licking County, the question is, “Are more ticks infected or are more cases being caught by healthcare providers?” My suspicion is that it is a combination of the two. Because Lyme disease symptoms are common to many other illnesses, including common viral infections, and because Lyme disease transmission is fairly new to Ohio, it is often mis-diagnosed and under-reported. Increased public education and provider awareness results in higher case counts, however, a Lyme diagnosis is sometimes missed until symptoms have progressed.

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If you are experiencing symptoms of fever, headache, and fatigue, it is important to let your healthcare provider know if you have had a recent tick bite or a rash, so that information can be considered in their differential diagnosis.

CDC tick bite prevention tips:

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- Avoid ticks by walking in the center of trails and avoiding wooded and brushy areas with high grass and leaf litter.
- Repel ticks on skin and clothing by using repellent that contains 20 percent or more DEET, picaridin, or IR3535 on exposed skin for protection that lasts several hours, always follow product instructions. Parents should apply this product to their children, avoiding hands, eyes, and mouth.
- Use products that contain permethrin on clothing. Treat clothing and gear, such as boots, pants, socks and tents with products containing 0.5% permethrin. It remains protective through several washings.
- Find and remove ticks from your body by bathing or showering as soon as possible after coming indoors (preferably within 2 hours) to wash off and more easily find ticks that are crawling on you. Conduct a full-body tick check using a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body upon return from tick-infested areas. Parents should check their children for ticks under the arms, in and around the ears, inside the belly button, behind the knees, between the legs, around the waist, and especially in their hair. Examine gear and pets.
- Ticks can ride into the home on clothing and pets, then attach to a person later, so carefully examine pets, coats, and day packs. Tumble dry clothes in a dryer on high heat for 10 minutes to kill ticks on dry clothing after you come indoors.

The first line of defense against tick-borne disease is prevention by following these recommendations. To reduce the health impact of tick bites we need to increase awareness to our residents-both adults and children-and our healthcare providers, to achieve early diagnosis and treatment of tick-borne diseases

Joe Ebel is the Licking County Health Commissioner.

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