



Six Things to Know about Ticks

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It's tick season in Massachusetts.

Wait...is there really a "season" for ticks? Not really. The first thing you need to know about ticks is they are in season most of the year, anytime the temperature is above freezing, but they are most active in the summer. Therefore, while extra vigilance is required during the summer months (when we are also outdoors more), it's a good idea in the spring and fall to be wary of them as well.

Here are five additional things you need to know about ticks. And stay tuned to the end for a chance to learn even more...and possibly make \$100 too.

(1) Ticks can't jump

Nor do they swoop down, or glide through the air, to attach to us or our pets. Quite the opposite, they hang on the edge of shrubs and long blades of grass, their "arms" outstretched, like this, waiting for a warm-blooded creature to brush against them. (This posture is called "questing")

Therefore, keeping your grass short, sticking to the middle of the paths, and keeping your pets on a short leash are all good defenses.



(2) Clothing matters

Wear long pants in the woods, tuck them into your socks, and spray tick repellent around your cuffs anyway, like this:

Note that the person on the left is wearing light-colored clothes, which makes ticks much easier to spot.

Finally, you can buy tick-repellent clothes...and they work!



(Photo courtesy of <https://www.wellsreserve.org/>)

(3) Let's talk Lyme Disease

Lots to know about Lyme Disease, the most common tick-borne illness in New England. First, it doesn't always come with a bullseye rash. You can get it without a rash. So if you have flu-like or other unusual symptoms but no rash, you should nonetheless seek a diagnosis and possible treatment for Lyme.

Second, the tick must be on you for at least 36 hours to transmit it. The time to transmission had been thought to be 24 hours, so daily tick checks are more than sufficient. And, if you get sick after finding a tick that you are certain has not been attached for 36 hours, it is not Lyme Disease.

Finally, Lyme Disease is often misdiagnosed, both false positives and false negatives. It can go dormant and then reappear, with a wide variety of symptoms. Most commonly, if as an adult you suddenly develop what is diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis (RA), it may very well be Lyme Disease. It is an important "differential diagnosis" because the treatment for RA may worsen Lyme Disease by suppressing the immune response to the Lyme bacteria.

(4) There are many other tick-borne illnesses

The newest tick to infest the Northeast is called the Lone Star tick, because of its distinctive dot:

This tick transmits something called Alpha-gal syndrome. Its major symptom is a severe allergy to red meat and possibly other mammal products. There is no treatment other than avoiding the offending proteins.



In total, there are currently 17 identified tick-borne illnesses. Many are hard to diagnose and treat so prevention is the name of the game.

(5) In case you get sick, keep that tick.

Because there are 17, the “differential diagnosis” is key. It can be helpful to keep the tick in a jar with a leaf, to possibly send to a lab. This is far from a foolproof way to diagnose a disease. First, be somewhat wary of commercial labs that serve the entire nation. Local labs are better because many of these 17 diseases are not found in Massachusetts. Other shortcomings of labs are that some ticks carry multiple diseases, or the lab might “find” the wrong one. Looking at the number of tests this lab does, you can easily imagine finding plenty of pathogens in any given tick, when perhaps only one infected you.

Even so, keeping the tick is a good idea because an expert can recognize the species and what diseases it could carry. And a lab can be useful to confirm a diagnosis from a doctor, rather than making a diagnosis from the tick.

So sending a tick to a lab would just be one option, rather than the clear solution, when it comes to diagnosing tick-borne illness.

Incredibly, there are many more things to know about ticks as well. All are covered in this month’s Quizzify quiz at <https://mass.quizzify.com/>. If you haven’t yet signed up for Quizzify, you can do so right there. You’ll learn a lot in these monthly “Jeopardy-meets-health education” games, and no personal health information is ever requested.

Plus, if you have MIIA/Blue Cross health insurance, you’ll be in the running for one of ten \$100 gift cards we award every month.

To make it even easier to sign up, point your phone at this QR code, create an account, and you’re in.

