

## Lyme disease. Should you worry?

Definitely, says Phyllis Mervine, president of the nonprofit California Lyme Disease Association (CALDA) headquartered in Ukiah. Lyme disease that is not diagnosed and treated promptly can lead to debilitating chronic illness that attacks the brain, heart, joints, and other organs and causes extreme fatigue, headaches, depression, panic attacks, OCD, pain, and other symptoms. Sometimes people are misdiagnosed with MS, fibromyalgia, or even psychiatric illness. Mervine herself was diagnosed with a form of arthritis and was sick for over ten years before she was diagnosed and treated.

At least half the people with Lyme disease don't remember a tick bite. That's because the tick is the size of a poppy seed and their bite is painless, Mervine says. The month of May is prime time for the tiny ticks. Ticks climb onto logs to wait for a lizard or mouse to feed on. If you get there first, your blood will be breakfast. Sitting on a log for a few minutes or leaning back against a tree trunk may allow them to climb on you. Gathering wood is also risky.

In Mendocino County, as many as 15 percent or more of the ticks are infected with Lyme disease bacteria and some also carry one or more of several other diseases known to infect ticks in California, such as *Anaplasma* and *Babesia*. Contracting more than one infection in a single bite makes diagnosis and treatment more complicated.

### How can you avoid catching Lyme disease?

Avoid tick-infested areas like leaf litter under oak trees, and don't sit on downed logs. Use a tick spray containing permethrin on your clothing and DEET on your skin. Check yourself for ticks often and for several days after you have been outdoors. Remove ticks *before* they bite. Check your bedding for ticks that fall off fully fed – these are the ones most likely to give you Lyme disease. Remove any ticks you find on your skin quickly and carefully. Don't squeeze the tick or apply any substance to make it “back out.” Use tweezers or a special tick-removing tool available from CALDA.

Any tick that bites a human can be tested, although it is simpler and cheaper just to ask for preventive treatment. Imagine finding out the tick *was* infected and the germs have already had a week or two to spread throughout your body. (Antibiotic treatment carries some risk.) The chance of becoming infected depends on how long the tick was attached and whether it was removed properly. CALDA suggests saving the tick in a container or plastic bag and labeling it, whether you test it or not.

### Where should you get tested?

The early sign of Lyme disease for most people is a flu-like illness. Sometimes a rash develops but only a few are classic bull's-eyes. If you think you might have Lyme disease, ask your doctor to order tests from a CLIA- and Medicare-approved lab that reports all bands on the western blot (a kind of test). IGeneX Lab in Palo Alto has a full range of sophisticated Lyme tests ([www.igenex.com](http://www.igenex.com) or 800-832-3200). Even if your tests are negative, if you have been exposed to ticks and/or have symptoms that could be Lyme disease, you can choose a trial of treatment. After explaining your options, your doctor may ask you to sign an informed consent form that says there are risks to being treated and the outcome is not guaranteed. Your doctor can obtain peer-reviewed guidelines from the International Lyme and Associated Diseases Society ([www.ilads.org](http://www.ilads.org) or call 301-263-1080).

The author lives in Ukiah and can be reached at 707-468-8460.

For More Information:

CALDA online – [www.lymedisease.org](http://www.lymedisease.org)

Online support – <http://health.groups.yahoo.com/group/CaliforniaLyme>

National Lyme Disease Association toll-free hotline – 888-366-6611

Check Ukiah Natural Foods or the Mendocino County Farm Supply for CALDA brochures.