

Tick Bites and Disease

What are ticks?

Ticks are tiny bugs, about the size of a sesame seed, which feed on blood. Different ticks prefer different types of animals. Sometimes a tick will bite a person instead of biting an animal. While most tick bites do not result in disease, some do.

In British Columbia, over the past few years, a large number of ticks have been collected from the southern part of the province and examined at the provincial laboratory in Vancouver. The organism which causes Lyme Disease (*Borrelia burgdorferi*) has been found in ticks collected from all areas so far checked, including Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, the Lower Mainland including the Fraser Valley, and the Sechelt Peninsula. Further studies are being conducted on ticks from other parts of the province.

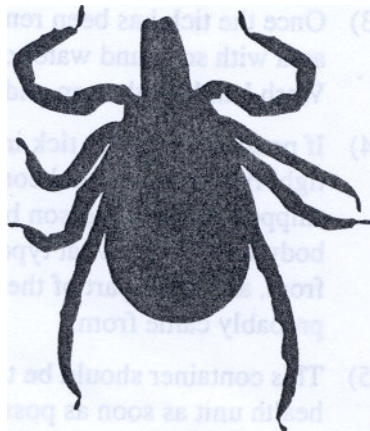
To date in British Columbia there have been about 30 confirmed cases of Lyme Disease. Of these, eight cases (central Interior, southern Okanagan, south-eastern B.C., Vancouver Island, the Lower Mainland and the Gulf Islands as far north as Cortez Island) had no record of travel outside of the province, and are considered to have contracted the disease in B.C.

Only certain types of ticks carry disease and there is only a very small chance of them giving it to you. However, because the resulting disease can be serious, it is worth taking steps to avoid being bitten.

Ticks live in tall grass and wooded areas. They are easiest to spot when they are actually sucking blood. Ticks burrow part way into the skin, bite, draw blood, then drop off. The feeding tick's mouth will be under the skin, but the back parts will be sticking out. They will be full of blood and blue-grey in colour.

Female adult tick (approximate actual size)

Immature tick (approximate actual size)



Female adult tick (approximately 14 times actual size)

Avoiding Ticks

To protect yourself against tick and insect bites:

- 1) Walk on cleared trails wherever possible when walking in tall grass or woods.
- 2) Wear light coloured clothing. Tuck your top into your pants and tuck your pants into your boots or socks.

- 3) Put insect repellent (containing DEET) onto clothing and all uncovered skin. Reapply as frequently as directed on the container.
- 4) Check clothing and scalp (covered or not) when leaving an area where ticks may live. Make sure the lighting is good so that you will not miss seeing the ticks.
- 5) Regularly check household pets which go into tall grass and wooded areas.

What to do if you find a tick on the skin or scalp?

- 1) Use tweezers or forceps to gently get a hold of the tick as close to the skin as possible. Don't touch the tick with your hands.
- 2) Without squeezing the tick, steadily lift it straight off the skin. Avoid jerking it out. Try to make sure that all of the tick is removed.
- 3) Once the tick has been removed, clean the bite area with soap and water or rubbing alcohol. Wash hands with soap and water.
- 4) If possible, save the tick in a container with a tight fitting top. Label container with date shipped, name of person bitten, what part of the body was bitten, what type of animal the tick was from, and what part of the province the tick probably came from.
- 5) This container should be taken to your local health unit as soon as possible for testing at the provincial laboratory.
- 6) Ask your doctor for further advice.

Diseases spread by ticks

Several human diseases are caused from tick bites. The most well-known is Lyme disease. Others include relapsing fever, tularemia, and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. All of these diseases are rare in British Columbia.

What are the symptoms?

If you have the following symptoms within days or weeks after being bitten by a tick, please report them to your physician immediately. Tell him/her when and where you were bitten by a tick.

- 1) General symptoms of headache, muscle and joint pains, fatigue or weakness of the muscles of the face.
- 2) Skin rash, especially one that looks like a "Bull" Eye". It may or may not be where the bite was.

Treatment

If you have Lyme disease or another tick-related disease, you will need antibiotics to prevent complications of the disease.

For further information about tick bites and disease, contact your local health unit or department.