

# How to protect your child from Lyme disease



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As the weather improves and your kids go outside to play, protecting them from Lyme disease is more important than ever.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 300,000 Americans are diagnosed with Lyme disease annually. However, only approximately 30,000 cases are reported to the CDC.

Of those reported cases, approximately 37 percent are children, according to the Lyme Disease Association.

Lyme disease is an infection transmitted by ticks— the deer tick and the western black legged tick. While other ticks can carry Lyme bacteria, their bites have not been shown to transmit the disease.

“The vast majority of tick bites do not cause Lyme disease,” according to Dr. Benjamin Luft, a professor of medicine at Stony Brook University Medical Center in Long Island.

When it's found early, Lyme disease can be effectively treated, but if left undetected, it can cause a host of symptoms in kids that can affect their health, their behavior and their school performance.

Unfortunately, the disease is difficult to diagnose in children because they aren't always able to explain their symptoms. Lyme disease affects the brain and can look like mononucleosis, migraines and the flu.

"Lyme disease is such a complex set of infections that involves all of the body's systems, and in particular, the nervous system," Andrea Caesar, author of "A Twist of Lyme: Battling a Disease That 'Doesn't Exist,'" said. In 2011, Caesar was finally diagnosed with Lyme disease after 26 years of dealing with countless symptoms.

The good news is that there are ways you can prevent your child from being infected with Lyme disease. Follow these eight tips:

### **1. Do regular tick checks.**

A daily tick check, especially after playing outdoors, is one of the best ways to prevent Lyme disease. Scan your child's body and pay special attention to creases—on the ankles, in between the toes, behind the ears and the knees, in the groin, and on the neck and head.

### **2. Look in the hair, too.**

"Deer ticks are like little pieces of dirt—they're very hard to see," Caesar said. She recommends a "look and feel" approach by using a comb to separate the hair as you look for ticks. Or use a combination magnifying glass and tick remover tool.

### **3. Wear the right clothes.**

When your child is playing outside, consider dressing him in light-colored clothing, which will make identifying ticks easier when you do your regular checks. If possible, tuck pants into socks, pull the hair back, and have your child wear a hat.

### **4. Consider a repellent.**

Insect repellents with DEET are very effective but studies show they're also toxic. What's more, "with children, it's hard to measure the ratio of toxicity to benefit," Luft said. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends products used on kids should have no more than 30 percent DEET.

DEET should be sprayed on clothing, never on the face or hands, and not used daily, Luft said. A non-DEET repellent should always be labeled "safe for children."

### **5. Remove the tick immediately.**

Ticks are usually found in wooded areas but they can also show up in your backyard. It takes 48 hours to be infected with Lyme, so if you can remove the tick within that time period, you eliminate the possibility of infection, Luft said.

Use tweezers or a tick removal kit to remove the tick from its head, not the body, which might push the contents of the mid-gut into your child's skin. Pull the tick upward, without twisting, to avoid breaking off the mouth-parts.

### **6. Look for symptoms.**

One early stage of Lyme disease is a bull's-eye rash— a red, round patch at the site of the bite. This occurs in 80 to 90 percent of people, yet it's only reported in 35 to 60 percent, the International Lyme and Associated Diseases Society estimates.

If your kid has flu-like symptoms, a low-grade fever, feels tired or sluggish, make an appointment with the pediatrician.

### **7. Call the doctor.**

Diagnostic tests for Lyme disease may be more reliable a few days after infection, but it's best to consult your doctor as soon as possible.

"At the time of the tick bite, the test will invariably be negative because Lyme disease takes 7 to 10 days to develop and the immune response may be quite delayed," Luft said.

Your child's doctor may take a wait-and-watch approach or start your child on medication right away.

### **8. Get the tick tested.**

If you do find a tick, send it to a lab to see if it's a carrier for Lyme disease. "It's much easier to test a tick than it is to test a person," Caesar said. If it's positive, find a Lyme disease specialist at [www.ilads.org](http://www.ilads.org).

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