

Lyme Disease in Dogs

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When the weather gets warmer, people and their pets go outdoors more often. Walking in the park or camping are activities many people enjoy. Ticks are pests we may not think about as we are soaking up nature's beauty, but they are the vector that transmit Lyme disease to dogs.

According to Dr. Lynelle Johnson, a veterinarian at the University of Illinois College of Veterinary Medicine in Urbana, "Humans, dogs, cats, horses, and cows can all become infected with Lyme disease, but it is seen in humans and dogs most frequently."

Two life stages (the nymph and the adult) of the small, hard-shell tick of the Ixodes species are responsible for transmitting a spirochete organism that causes this disease. The nymphal stage of the tick is active in the spring of the year and the adult lives until early fall. In areas where this tick is abundant, one must be on the watch from April through September or October.

"Researchers think it is length of attachment time as opposed to frequent exposure, that plays a role in transmission of the disease," notes Dr. Johnson.

Signs of Lyme disease in dogs are fever, unwillingness to eat, sore joints, a stiff gait, or lameness that may shift from one leg to the other. The lameness may be sudden in onset. Keep in mind that many diseases exhibit these same signs. If your dog shows these signs, see your veterinarian. Lyme disease responds within two days to treatment with antibiotics, but the animal should be kept on the medicine for two to four weeks to ensure a cure.

Dr. Johnson says, "The best prevention is tick dips and sprays. There are also collars, but they only protect the head and neck area of the dog."

You can also feel the adult tick on your dog. If you find a tick on your pet, grasp it with a tweezers close to the animal's body and gently pull the tick straight out. Be careful not to crush the tick to avoid contact with its body fluid. Don't try to burn the tick or put petroleum jelly on it.

There is a vaccine against Lyme disease available, but its effectiveness is controversial. It will cause the animal to show a titer to the disease in its blood. This takes away an important tool for the veterinarian to use in diagnosing the disease. Vaccination may result in a disease that mimics Lyme disease or more serious side effects.

Some dog breeds seem more likely to get this disease. Where you live or your lifestyle may also mean exposure to the tick is more likely. Lyme disease is uncommon in Illinois, while in Wisconsin it is more of a problem. If you have any questions about Lyme disease, see your veterinarian.

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