
NEWS RELEASE

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State's First Verified Case of a Tick-Borne Disease Reported; Public Health Official Reminds the Public of Increased Risk of Diseases Carried by Ticks

Missouri's tick season officially got under way late last month with the year's first confirmed case of a potentially life-threatening tick-borne disease.

The first illness involved a woman in her 80s from south of St. Louis. The woman was hospitalized, but was later discharged and is now recovering. The woman contracted the disease known as ehrlichiosis, which can cause renal failure if left untreated.

Ehrlichiosis is transmitted by the lone star tick and symptoms begin with a sudden onset of fever and headache. Patients often report fatigue and muscle aches as well as other flu-like symptoms. Without prompt treatment, ehrlichiosis can be fatal. The illness can be treated with the antibiotic doxycycline in both adults and children.

Tick bites caused a record number of tick-borne diseases last year, when the first case also was confirmed in late April. Missouri health officials are urging people to check their bodies for ticks if they have been outdoors.

"Since so many Missourians depend on the outdoors for their livelihood or for recreation, we come into contact with ticks no matter where we live," said Howard Pue, Missouri's public health veterinarian. "The trick is to minimize their potential to do us harm by avoiding bites and removing attached ticks as soon as possible."

State health department statistics show that the number of tick-borne illnesses in Missouri grew to 668 last year, up nearly 100 compared with 2007. That gave Missouri a rate of 11 tick-borne illnesses for every 100,000 Missourians. The most commonly reported tick-borne diseases in Missouri are Rocky Mountain spotted fever, ehrlichiosis, and tularemia.

Pue said that ticks are probably closer than most people think. They can be found in the yard of an average home, as well as in bushes and tall grass around the property. This makes it important for anyone spending time outdoors to remember to check their clothes and skin frequently for ticks.

Tick checks are especially important for people over the age of 50, who have a higher risk of becoming seriously ill and being hospitalized if they are bitten by an infected tick.

"After being outdoors, even in your own yard, check yourself for ticks," Pue said. "If you live alone, use a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body."

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Pue warned that Rocky Mountain spotted fever, ehrlichiosis, and tularemia can lead to serious complications if they are not recognized early. All three, however, are effectively treated with antibiotics. The key symptoms to watch for after a tick bite are a sudden fever and severe headache, sometimes with chills, body aches, nausea, or vomiting. The rashes that can occur with Missouri tick-borne diseases usually do not appear until a person has been ill for four or five days. People may want to think about contacting their health care provider if those symptoms follow a tick bite or possible exposure to ticks.

“Prevention is the key to avoiding tick bites and the diseases they can carry,” said Pue. If your work or recreation takes you into areas where ticks live, use repellants and protective clothing to keep ticks from biting. Check often for ticks on your clothes or body. And if you find a tick on your body, remove it as quickly as possible, without squeezing the tick’s body.

Using a repellant that contains 20 percent to 50 percent DEET is a good choice for people who are outdoors for an extended period or who cannot avoid entering tick-infested habitat, Pue said. To reduce the number of ticks around homes, people should keep lawns mowed, brush trimmed, and leaf litter away from the dwelling. Keep trails or paths in wooded areas clear of vegetation. Dogs and cats should be treated with an effective tick repellant or by keeping them out of the woods to reduce ticks brought back into the yard.

Tick Bite Prevention Basics

- **Reduce tick habitat around the home and avoid heavy brush and tall grass elsewhere** – Keep the lawn cut short and cut back tall grass and brush from around the property. When enjoying the outdoors, stay to the center of trails and avoid walking through tall grass or brush.
- **Keep ticks off your skin** – Before spending time outdoors, apply a repellent that contains 20 percent to 50 percent DEET, and read the label to make sure you are using it correctly. Wear long sleeved shirts tucked into pants, and tuck pants into your socks or boots.
- **Perform tick checks** – After being outdoors, even in your own yard, check yourself, children and other family members every two to three hours for ticks. Look at their clothes and run your fingers over scalp and skin, looking for small bumps or new “moles”, and check hair, ear, and underarms. At night, before bathing and bed, use a hand-held or full-length mirror to view all parts of your body.
- **Promptly remove attached ticks** – Using a pair of fine-tipped tweezers, grasp the tick by the head or mouthparts where they enter the skin. DO NOT grasp the tick by the body. Without jerking, pull firmly and steadily directly outward. DO NOT twist the tick out or apply dishwashing soap, a hot match, alcohol or any other irritant to the tick in an attempt to get it to back out. Place the tick in a small container of alcohol to kill it and later discard in the trash. Clean the bite wound with soap and water and apply a commercial topical antiseptic. If a portion of the mouthparts of the tick remains embedded in the skin, it is not necessary to “dig” it out – cleansing and disinfecting of the tick bite site is all that is recommended.
- **Prevent family pets from bringing ticks indoors** – Discourage your pet from walking through tall brush or grass and carefully check your dog or cat for ticks before allowing them inside. The removal of tick habitat around your home should include tall grass and weeds around outdoor doghouses. Pesticide treatments for any type of tick should be limited to those areas where pets spend the most time. If you find ticks on your pets, contact your veterinarian for information about an appropriate tick treatment.

More information is available on the Department of Health and Senior Services Web site at www.dhss.mo.gov/TicksCarryDisease/.