

# Nervous tick

Colin Meek investigates every walker's nemesis come springtime strolls: contracting Lyme disease from the bite of a tick.

**W**hen Ray Wilby removed a tick from behind his knee in 2003 he didn't give it much thought. He has walked, run and climbed in the Scottish mountains for most of his life and knows all about the tiny insect.

"It was the time of year when I usually stop looking for them," says Ray. But when he fell ill four weeks later at home in Dingwall, and a strange rash appeared on different parts of his body, he made the connection.

"I felt rotten and depressed," he says. He tested positive for the bacterial infection *Lyme borreliosis* and recovered after two courses of antibiotics. Two years later, at the age of 61, Ray won the World Masters Mountain Running Championships in Keswick.

Ray was lucky. While science has known about Lyme disease for three decades, many people in the UK remain unaware of the risks, or confused about how it can be prevented. According to the Health Protection Agency (HPA), this confusion is partly explained by the 'grossly inaccurate' advice that can be found online.

So what are the risks to walkers? The number of confirmed Lyme disease cases has jumped from around 380 across Britain in 2002 to around 670 in 2005. Despite evidence that the general tick population in some parts of the country is growing, the head of the HPA's Lyme Borreliosis Unit at Southampton General Hospital, Susan O'Connell, believes the increase in confirmed cases is mostly down to better awareness among doctors. Doctors also diagnose roughly another 1,000 to 2,000 cases without conducting blood tests each year.

While figures show that Lyme disease is clearly a hazard for walkers, the risk can be managed.

"The best way to avoid infection is to be 'tick aware' and remove biting ticks as soon as you can," says Dr O'Connell. Being aware is about understanding how and where ticks feed so you can avoid them.

Get to know regions where ticks are endemic (see right). A bite is the only way you can get the infection. Ticks are most active in late spring, summer and early autumn and they prefer wooded areas, high grass and rough moorland.

Understand how infection is spread. A tick has to stay attached to you for at least 18 to 24 hours to give you *Lyme borreliosis*. Make sure you use this window of time to remove them. Only a minority of ticks carry the bacteria responsible for the disease.

Protect your skin. That means long sleeves and tucking in your trouser legs. Ticks can be the size of a poppy seed so you can spot them best on light-coloured clothes. Use a repellent spray containing DEET. After your walk, brush clothes and pets and check skin carefully for ticks, paying particular attention to skin folds and hairy areas.

Finally, if you find a biting tick, remove it straight away (see right). People in some areas are frequently bitten so seeing a doctor about every tick bite is not practical. But Dr O'Connell stresses the need to tell your doctor about the bite if you fall ill in the following days or weeks (see right about symptoms).

While the vast majority of people who are treated quickly recover, the consequences can be disastrous if the infection isn't spotted. Carmen Alfonso from Bristol has never fully recovered since she was bitten during a walk on Exmoor when she was 30. Her early symptoms were severe, but Lyme disease wasn't diagnosed until years later. Too late, she says, to prevent a 'catastrophic' impact on her life. She became weak, spent most of a year in bed, lost her teaching job and endured a range of frightening symptoms, including palpitations, vertigo and exhaustion. Since her diagnosis she has retrained and is working as a counsellor.



## Tick hot spots

In the UK include: New Forest, Salisbury Plain, Exmoor, Thetford Forest, Lake District, Yorkshire Moors and the Scottish Highlands and Islands. An increasing number of cases diagnosed in the UK are being acquired elsewhere in Europe, including Slovenia, Croatia, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Poland, Scandinavia and the Baltic republics.

## How to remove a tick

Hold the tick as close to the skin as possible and pull steadily away, then clean your skin. Use small tweezers if you have them. Don't attempt to dig out any mouthparts that are left embedded. Smothering the tick in antiseptic or cream may cause the tick to regurgitate, making infection more likely. Disinfectant can be used after removal.

## Lyme disease symptoms

Within three to 30 days of initial infection: a slowly expanding rash that may clear in the middle (not everyone gets this). Other early signs include tiredness, headaches, fevers and muscle pain.

Later symptoms: established Lyme disease is difficult to diagnose as none of the symptoms are peculiar only to *Lyme borreliosis*. Blood tests are recommended if your doctor thinks you have had an infection that wasn't treated early. Symptoms include: losing control of muscles in your face (facial palsy); numbness and pain; losing proper control of your movements; meningitis; arthritis; joint pain; palpitations; sleeplessness and dizziness. These symptoms take months or years to resolve. Lyme disease can cause other very severe symptoms, but these are rare.

## Weblinks

Health Protection Agency: [www.hpa.org.uk](http://www.hpa.org.uk)

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention: [www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/lyme](http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/lyme)

European Concerted Action on Lyme Borreliosis (EUCALB): [www.oeghmp.at/eucal](http://www.oeghmp.at/eucal)

