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Public Health
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TICK SEASON IN HENDRICKS COUNTY

Taking precautions can prevent spread of tick-borne disease

HENDRICKS COUNTY – Tick season is in full force in Hendricks County, and local public health officials are urging residents to take precautions to prevent bites and eliminate hiding spots throughout the summer.

“We know ticks carry disease that can be transmitted to people and pets when they are bitten,” says Julie Haan, Director of Environmental Health at the Hendricks County Health Department. “While ticks can be active year-round, the late spring through summer is when ticks are most active. Due to warmer than normal temperatures this year we expect to see an increase in tick activity.”

Ticks can carry multiple diseases that can infect humans such as Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, Babesiosis, Tularemia, Ehrlichia, and more. Some ticks can transmit multiple diseases, causing co-infections. Co-infections can make diagnosing and treating the diseases more challenging.

Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF) has received increased attention within the past weeks. RMSF is a serious illness that can be fatal in the first 8 days of symptoms if not treated correctly. “Diagnosis must be made based on clinical signs and symptoms and later confirmed by laboratory tests. Doxycycline is the first line antibiotic of choice and is most effective at preventing death if started in the first five days of symptoms. If treated within the first five days, fever generally subsides within 24-72 hours,” states Dr. David Stopperich, Health Officer at the Hendricks County Health Department.

Hendricks County data from 2009-2016 reported 0 cases of RMSF, 6 cases of Lyme disease, and 0 cases of Babesiosis, Tularemia, and Ehrlichia. 2017 data is incomplete at this time. Anyone who has been diagnosed with RMSF within 2017 should contact their local health department to ensure a field study of ticks is completed in the area where there has been exposure.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), tick bites can be prevented by avoiding wooded and bushy areas with high grass and leaf litter, using insect repellent containing 20-30% DEET, and pre-treating clothing, boots, pants, socks, and other gear with products containing 0.5% permethrin.

“As soon as you come indoors, take a bath or shower and look over your entire body, especially on the scalp and behind the ears, for ticks,” continues Haan. “Once you have checked for and properly removed any ticks, look over any camping or hiking gear, pets, and clothes for any hitchhiking ticks. Then, put your clothes in dryer on high heat for an hour to kill any stragglers.”

While there are many folklore remedies for removing ticks, the CDC recommends using a pair of fine-tipped tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin's surface as possible. Once grasped, pull upward with steady, even pressure until the tick is removed. Dispose of live ticks by submersing them in alcohol, sealing them in a bag, or flushing them down the toilet. Clean the bite area and hands with rubbing alcohol or soap and water.

“You want to remove a tick as quickly as possible, and never crush a tick with your fingers as it can spread disease,” suggests Haan. “Remedies like coating a tick in nail polish or using heat to get the tick to detach prolongs the time a tick can pass disease into your body. The goal is to remove the tick as quickly as possible to limit the chances of it passing disease.”

It is essential to pay close attention to any symptoms that may develop after being bitten by a tick. “Symptoms of tick borne diseases develop within a few days to a few weeks and typically include fever and chills, aches and pains, and rashes that can vary by disease. One should also relay to a physician if they had exposure to areas where ticks may have been present since tick bites are usually painless and many people who develop tick borne diseases do not remember being bitten,” states Dr. Stopperich.

“If you experience any of these symptoms after being bitten by a tick or being in an area with ticks, see your doctor or other health care provider immediately,” advises Dr. Stopperich. “The sooner you can treat symptoms, the lower the risk of serious complications.”

In addition to preventing bites, residents should take additional steps to eliminate ticks in outdoor areas:

- Eliminate areas of leaf litter, tall grasses, and brush on or near yards
- Place a 3-foot wide barrier of wood chips or gravel between yards and wooded areas
- Keep playground equipment, decks, and patios away from the yard edge
- Dispose of old furniture, mattresses, and trash that can give ticks places to hide

For more information about tick prevention, visit the CDC's Ticks webpage at www.cdc.gov/ticks/ or contact the Hendricks County Health Department Environmental Health Division at (317) 745-9217.