Lyme Disease is increasingly being discussed in the media and by colleagues who have experienced Lyme Disease. Often information about Lyme Disease can be conflicting at best, and, at worst, unsubstantiated by scientific fact. So, whilst awareness of Lyme Disease is increasing, it can be hard to know where to look for advice on how to avoid contracting it, and what steps to take if you suspect you have Lyme Disease.

As part of a wider campaign including staff case studies, films and tool box talks, we’re producing two blog posts to clear up some of the myths surrounding Lyme Disease. In this Summer blog post, we’ll cover:

- What is Lyme Disease?
- What do ticks look like?
- How can we avoid ticks?

In the Autumn, we’ll discuss the signs and symptoms of Lyme Disease in more detail.

Let’s get down to business, then. What exactly is Lyme Disease? We’ll start by getting the science bit out of the way.

**What is Lyme Disease?**

Lyme Disease is an infectious disease caused by the *Borrelia* bacteria, and also known as Lyme Borreliosis for this reason. *Borrelia* bacteria is carried by small mammals, such as hedgehogs, squirrels and rodents, as well as ground-nesting birds. Ticks feed on these creatures, and become carriers for Lyme Disease. It can be transmitted to us if we are bitten by an infected tick. Current research suggests Lyme Disease isn’t transmitted between people or through the womb. Lyme Disease isn’t the only tick-borne infection, but it is the most prevalent.

Reported cases have risen by 1,500% percent in recent years, but many cases aren’t reported, so the percentage is likely much higher. Anyone who spends time in wooded habitats – whether for work or leisure – is potentially at risk.

Caught early, Lyme Disease can be successfully treated with antibiotics. If left untreated, however, it can lead to problems affecting the joints, nervous system, and the heart. Lyme Disease can therefore be a serious illness, but there are plenty of things we can do to avoid contracting it.
The first step is tick avoidance – reducing the chance of getting a tick bite reduces your risk of Lyme Disease. Let’s get science-y again.

What do ticks look like?

Ticks are small, parasitic members of the arachnid family not only related to spiders, but mites and scorpions too. Ticks feed on the blood of birds, small mammals, sheep, cattle, deer, and us, given the chance.

Ticks are active year-round, particularly between March and October. They are found in woodlands, heathland and moorland, as well as urban parks and gardens. Ticks like long, dense, damp foliage, such as bracken and grass where they wait for creatures to pass their hiding place, and latch on. Feeds generally lasts three to five days, with a tick feeding once in each phase of its lifecycle. There are three phases to this cycle – Larvae, Nymph and Adult.

Larvae are the baby ticks, not much bigger than a full stop. They can be difficult to spot without a magnifying glass, and look like tiny black spiders. Larvae don’t carry Lyme Disease as ticks are not born with it.

Nymphs are the size of a poppy seed, often mistaken for a blackhead or a spot. From this stage in their life cycle, ticks can transmit Lyme Disease.

Unfed adults are about 3 mm long. They are reddish brown to black in colour, and oval and flat in shape. When engorged, adult ticks are about the size of a pea and will generally be grey in colour.

On average, one in ten ticks carries Lyme Disease – but this is not a definite figure. What we do know, is that tick size doesn’t relate to the risk of infection. Nymphs and Adults can be carriers, irrespective of size, shape and colour.

Now that we know what we’re avoiding, what can we do to protect ourselves against ticks in the outdoors?
How can we avoid ticks?

Before you go into the outdoors, ensure your skin is covered – for instance, wear trousers instead of shorts, and choose clothing made of closely-woven material to stop ticks climbing through holes and onto your skin. You can also get repellent impregnated clothing, which has proven excellent at preventing tick bites.

Try not to leave gaps in your clothing – for example, wear gaiters or tuck your socks into your trousers, and fasten any tabs around your waist or wrists.

Of course, in the summer, it might be too hot to wear a coat with all the zips and tabs done up. Instead, you can apply spray-on insect repellent to any uncovered areas of skin, and regularly check yourself for ticks.

When you enter forested areas, avoid dense vegetation if you can (your work may not always allow this), and stick to cleared paths. Don’t sit on the ground under trees – ticks like moist, shady areas – and don’t sit on the ground in areas with sheep or deer. Check your clothes and any exposed skin regularly whilst in the forestry environment.

After leaving the outdoors, again check your clothes and skin for any loose ticks. Put your clothes through the wash to avoid ticks spreading through your house, and clean muddy footwear in case ticks are present.

If you have been in the outdoors with a dog, check them for ticks as they could pass a tick on to you, or another family member, or contract Lyme Disease themselves if ticks aren’t removed safely and promptly.

And that’s it. Be vigilant, but don’t let Lyme Disease stop you going into the outdoors – the risk is low compared to the benefits of being outdoors. By following these simple, proactive steps, you can avoid tick bites, and reduce your risk of Lyme Disease.

In the next post, we’ll cover how to remove ticks safely, the signs and symptoms of Lyme Disease, and what to tell your doctor if you think you have been exposed to Lyme Disease.