

Bitten by a tick? Bring it in for a Lyme disease test

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FREEHOLD BUREAU

Monmouth County residents who get bitten by a tick won't have to wonder for long if the blood-thirsty insect attached to their skin is carrying Lyme disease.

The Monmouth County Mosquito Extermination Commission unveiled a program Wednesday that will allow county residents to bring a tick to its Wayside Road facility for identification and testing to determine whether the tick has Lyme or some other transmissible disease.

"This is an invaluable public service," Freeholder Robert D. Clifton said. "Now we can tell in a matter of days whether a tick is carrying Lyme disease."

Clifton, the freeholder board's liaison to the mosquito commission, said each tick will be identified within 24 hours at no charge. Residents can then decide whether to pay a \$25 lab fee to determine whether the tick is infected with a disease. That process takes another three to nine days.

Patricia V. Smith, president of the Lyme Disease Association Inc., said there are only a few counties nationwide offering this service.

"I'm very excited about this," said Smith, who lives in Wall. "Lyme disease causes a lot of suffering ... You don't want to mess with it."

Monmouth's Tick Identification and Testing Service is being touted as the most extensive tick-related information service available at a single location in New Jersey.

Sean P. Healy, an entomologist with the mosquito commission, said the program will serve as a first alert for those who fear they may have contracted a disease.

Some ticks do not carry disease. Healy said he will inspect those that do, to see how full of blood they are. A tick usually needs to stick to the body for 24 hours before it can transmit a disease.

If he is asked to, Healy will send the tick to the mosquito commission's lab at Rutgers University in New Brunswick to test for the presence of the Lyme

disease-causing organism. The lab will also test for other diseases such as babesiosis, ehrlichiosis and Rocky Mountain spotted fever.

Healy said half of the female deer ticks are infected with the bacterium that causes Lyme disease. About a quarter of nymphs have the bacterium, but they can be more dangerous because they are smaller and harder to spot on the body.

Several people at Dorbrook Recreation Area, Colts Neck, praised the program.

"I think it's a good idea," Shirley Coger of Red Bank said. Getting tested "is the sensible thing to do."

Brenda Tietjen of Freehold Township said as she wheeled her 15-month-old son into the playground that she would take advantage of the service. She wished, however, that there wasn't a charge for it.

"If there's not enough money in the budget, then I'm willing to pay for it," she said, adding that her husband has Lyme disease. "It's a scary enough disease that you want to get it taken care of right away."

Ocean County's Health Department has been offering a less sophisticated service for about a decade. Ella Boyd, coordinator of the department's community health services, said her program requires county residents to bring in a live female deer tick for testing. It is crushed and checked for the bacterium that causes Lyme disease.

Monmouth's program allows the tick to be brought in dead or alive. If it breaks apart when removed from the skin, remember the bug's body is the most important piece to salvage.

Dr. Morris Brodkey of Toms River said he believes the services provided by both counties are beneficial, particularly for people who don't have insurance and find out they are not at risk.

"Twenty five dollars is a hell of a lot cheaper than a doctor's visit," he said.

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