

TICK WATCH

Our state has the third-highest number of Lyme disease cases in the country.

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For nature lovers, few areas are as attractive as South Jersey when the Pinelands are in bloom. The diverse terrain offers everything from densely forested state parks to wide-open farmland, meandering streams and colorful meadows. But within those beautiful vistas lurk a tiny but potentially disastrous health threat: the common tick.

Ticks, which feed on blood from a diverse population of animals, are responsible for transmitting Lyme disease. The debilitating and sometimes deadly illness is caused by bacteria that attack the central nervous system, causing a variety of symptoms, including flulike illness; joint and muscle pain and swelling; neurological difficulties such as migraine, numbness, dizziness and involuntary twitching; cardiac irregularities; and memory and vision problems.

South Jersey has highest rate

New Jersey has the third-highest incidence of Lyme disease, trailing only New York and Pennsylvania, according to the most recent report from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Numbers from the New Jersey Department of Health and Senior Services also show Lyme disease rates are higher in Southern New Jersey than in other parts of the state.

"We generally have a lot of Lyme disease in this area," said Burlington County Health Department spokesman Bob Gogats. Because of those high rates, Gogats said it's important nature lovers know how to avoid tick bites and the early symptoms of Lyme disease so they can receive timely treatment and prevent more severe, long-term illness.

Lyme disease awareness is a message Shannon Jaskolski, 36, wishes she had heard 18 years ago. During her freshman year of college, the Pennsauken resident was bitten by several ticks that attached themselves to her leg during a routine walk along a wooded path on the Richard Stockton College campus in Pomona.

Know the signs

"When I found the ticks on my calves, I was so freaked out I just scrubbed them off, which was probably the wrong thing to do," said Jaskolski, who was unfamiliar with proper tick removal techniques. Within a month, Jaskolski began experiencing nausea, memory loss, flulike symptoms and bad headaches — all classic symptoms of Lyme disease. Still, it took two years for her to get a proper diagnosis. In the interim, Jaskolski said she was diagnosed with everything from chronic bronchitis to walking pneumonia.

"My family doctor decided to test me for Lyme disease because he actually got diagnosed with it himself," Jaskolski said. "I was relieved to finally have a diagnosis that made sense."

Jaskolski was placed on a five-week regimen of intravenous antibiotics to treat her advanced Lyme disease, but said she experienced limited recovery. Over the years she's undergone several additional rounds of antibiotic treatment, but has continued to experience the chronic exhaustion, painful joints and other debilitating symptoms of Lyme disease. "My doctor thinks the multiple bites and delay in diagnosis caused my problems."

According to Dr. John Patterson, an infectious disease specialist and medical director for the Burlington County Health Department, cases like Jaskolski's can be difficult to treat because neurological damage increases when the bacteria that cause Lyme disease are allowed to flourish unchecked. "It's a disease that takes place over decades," he explained. Treating tick bites and catching Lyme disease in its earliest stage is key to preventing chronic disease, Patterson said.