

4-29-11 Bugs 'n Bats and All Things Beautiful

It is late morning of this year in New England. Everything is waking up, whether we want it to or not. The flowers and opening buds are a welcome sight. Even from our car we can see the changing colors. The maples along the edge of wetlands are waving their tiny red flowers, as if blushing in response to the activities of the vernal pools. The little bunny tails of the pussy willows have turned from soft grey to fluffy yellow. The birds are shouting their declarations of territory. Nature is in full swing and there's no holding it back!

While we live with glorious nature, taking some steps to protect ourselves are also in order. Awareness goes a long way toward that protection. Being aware of the causes of Lyme disease, rabies, Eastern equine encephalitis and West Nile virus allows us to weigh out risks and benefits when we take that walk in the woods, go kayaking or let in our cat or dog. All those activities have benefits of increasing our exercise; reducing our blood pressure and making us smile. They also bring us closer to the bugs and animals that can carry disease.

Lyme disease is the number one reportable disease I see arriving at my board of health office. They arrive all year round and there are more cases each and every year. Ticks are active year round any time the temperatures are above freezing. Most of the tick borne disease is carried by the tiny deer tick. You will see an outline of red, with a black center. The larger wood or dog tick is brown with a grey marking in its center. The initial symptoms of Lyme are easy to miss, as the "mild flu-like symptoms" will go away. Days to weeks later the person may develop a severe headache and begin to have joint and muscle pain. Get to the doctor right away at that point and insist on being tested for Lyme. It is important to treat as soon as possible and sufficiently in order to prevent the neurological and/or major organ involvement. If you develop a sagging of one side of the face, known as "Bell's palsy", get to the doctor and ask lots of questions on how this needs to be treated, as left alone, it can leave some permanent damage in much the same way that shingles may leave a reoccurring trail of nerve-ending pain.

Here are three things you can do to prevent Lyme disease:

One: Wear clothing that has been treated with permethrin. Once dry, the pesticide does not enter your skin but stays on the cloth through five cold water washes. And you look really cool as a knowledgeable and well-defended person when you wear a pair of white tube socks with the toe seam cut off, pulled over your shoes and pant legs, like Scrooge McDuck wearing spats. Insect repellants are not very effective in deterring ticks but the dried permethrin kills them!

Two: We can also spray our yards with garlic juice. Get it under the leaves and in the brush, forming a cumulative barrier against ticks and mosquitoes around your house.

Three: Faithfully, conduct a tick check after enjoying outdoor activities. The tick has to be attached for its blood meal for about 36 hours in order to transmit the disease. Still

moving/crawling? You got it in time. Know it wasn't there yesterday? You got it in time. Need some help in looking? Play the Brad Paisley song and have fun! "I'd like to walk you through a field of wildflowers, I'd like to check you for ticks...."

<http://www.jango.com/music/Brad+Paisley?l=0>

Every year I wonder what the summer will bring for mosquito activity. I can't help it. Ever since my town lost a five year girl to Eastern equine encephalitis, I want to do anything I can to prevent that tragedy from happening again. Will the abundant snows of 2010/2011 translate into more surface and groundwater? Will the temperatures be warm enough to produce the bumper crop of swamp mosquitoes, as it did last summer? We'll see.

It is reassuring to know that we are not at risk in the spring and early summer. During those months, the virus is amplifying between birds and bugs. Eventually, it builds to such a crescendo, that we are at risk from contracting disease from infected mosquitoes. Once it reaches that point in July or August, it is there until a hard frost. So, enjoy the outdoors in the spring and early summer, without repellent, if you feel strongly about that. In late summer and during the fall, take all the precautions to avoid mosquito bites: Avoid outdoor activities dawn to dusk, use repellents, and repair screens. Do not allow standing water. Apply environmentally responsible products such as Altosid or Dunks to areas of stagnant water such as ditches and catch basins, to prevent the wiggling larvae from ever becoming a flying adult. An ounce of prevention is worth more than a pound of cure.

All creatures great and small, the Lord God made them all. Tune in next week for some information on beautiful bats.

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