How to Defend Yourself

Tickborne illnesses, such as Lyme disease or Rocky Mountain spotted fever, can be prevented if you don't let the nasty bugs bite you in the first place.

June 19, 2000 -- Each summer, new cases of tick-borne illnesses like Rocky Mountain spotted fever, Lyme disease, and ehrlichiosis surge in the United States. Hot zones for tick trouble include the Northeastern and Southeastern states, as well as parts of the Midwest, Texas, and California. Almost anywhere ticks lurk, however, you could find yourself in trouble. Luckily, a few simple tips from the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention can help you and your family avoid tick trouble this summer and still enjoy the great outdoors.

* If you live in a wooded area, remove leaves and clear brush and tall grass from around the house and the edges of the garden where immature ticks often reside.
* When you're hiking or camping in wooded areas, wear light-colored clothing so that you can spot any ticks that jump on board.
* Wear long pants and tuck the legs into socks or boots. Some experts recommend putting tape around the area where pants and socks meet for added protection.
* Consider spraying insect repellent containing DEET on clothes.
* Stick to the middle of hiking trails to avoid brushing against leaves or grasses where ticks lie in wait.
* Once you get home, inspect yourself carefully. Use a mirror to check difficult-to-observe parts of your body.
* If you find a tick, don't panic. Removing it quickly can help prevent the transmission of disease. Forget the advice about using a lighted match or cigarette to force the tick to back out. Covering it with Vaseline doesn't work, either, says physician Michael Felz, MD, a tick expert at the Medical College of Georgia, in Augusta. Most likely you'll kill the tick in place, making matters worse. Instead, grasp the tick with fine tweezers as close to your skin as possible, and pull straight out. Then clean the area with a disinfectant.
* Although it is best to have any tick bite examined by a doctor, this is especially true if a rash more than an inch wide appears at the site of a bite. It could be a sign of Lyme disease. If you develop flu-like symptoms any time within a month after being bitten, it's also important to see a physician. The symptoms could be a sign of ehrlichiosis, another serious tick-borne disease.

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