

# Lyme disease

## Department of Infectious Diseases

Information for Patients

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### What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection spread by being bitten by an infected tick. Around 2,000 to 3,000 new cases of Lyme disease happen in England and Wales each year. It is easier to treat Lyme disease in its early stages. If it is not treated or treatment is delayed, there is a risk of developing long-lasting symptoms.

### How do you get Lyme disease?

Only a small number of ticks are infected with the bacteria (*Borrelia burgdorferi*) that cause Lyme disease. Being bitten by a tick does not mean you will definitely get Lyme disease. Ticks do not jump or fly, but climb on to your clothes or skin if you brush against something they are on.

It's important to check your skin regularly as ticks can be very small. Their bites are not painful so you may not realise you have been bitten, particularly if it's on your back, buttocks or in your hair. You are more likely to become infected if the tick remains on your skin for longer than 24 hours.

Ticks that may cause Lyme disease are found all over the UK in woods, grasslands, urban parks, gardens and allotments. High risk locations include wooded areas in southern England and the Scottish Highlands.

**Health information and support is available at [www.nhs.uk](http://www.nhs.uk)  
or call 111 for non-emergency medical advice**

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## Early symptoms

People who have early Lyme disease often get a bulls-eye-shaped red skin rash around a tick bite.

This rash can appear up to 3 months after being bitten.

Most appear in the first 4 weeks and last several weeks.

About 1 in 3 people do not notice a rash.

Some people get flu-like symptoms in the early stages such as;

- high temperatures,
- headaches,
- muscle/joint pains and tiredness/loss of energy.



## Later symptoms

More severe symptoms can develop several weeks, months or even years later if Lyme disease is left untreated or is not treated early on.

These can include:

- Joint pain and swelling
- Nerve problems – such as pain or numbness
- Heart problems
- Trouble with memory or concentration

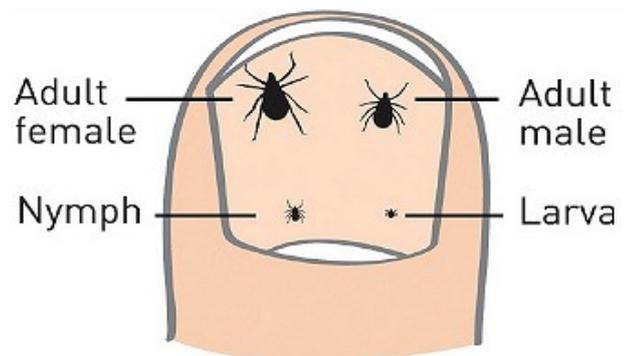


Figure showing size of ticks compared with an adult thumb. Image courtesy of Lyme Disease Action.

## Testing and treating Lyme disease

Diagnosing Lyme disease is often difficult as many of the symptoms are similar to other conditions.

If you have a suspected Lyme disease rash, the doctor may decide to treat you with antibiotics for 3 weeks. It is important you take the whole course, even if you start to feel better to make sure all the bacteria are killed.

If you do not have a characteristic rash but do have other symptoms of Lyme disease, blood tests can be done. Blood tests can be negative in the early stages of the infection. You may need to be tested again if Lyme disease is still suspected 4 to 6 weeks after a first negative test result.



A few people who are diagnosed and treated for Lyme disease continue to have symptoms, like:

- tiredness
- aches
- and loss of energy that can last years.

It is not understood why this happens to some people. If you have long-lasting symptoms, you may be referred to a specialist for further investigation and management. Once treated appropriately long-lasting symptoms of Lyme disease often do not respond to further courses of antibiotics.

### Remove a tick safely by:

1. Using fine-tipped tweezers or a tick-removal tool. You can buy these from some pharmacies, vets and pet shops.
2. Grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible.
3. Slowly pull upwards, taking care not to squeeze or crush the tick. Dispose of it when you have removed it.

Clean the bite with antiseptic or soap and water.

### Avoid tick bites by:

1. Covering your skin while walking outdoors. Tuck your trousers into your socks.
2. Using insect repellent on your clothes and skin. Those containing DEET are best.
3. Stick to paths whenever possible.
4. Wearing light coloured clothes so ticks are easier to spot and brush off.

### Contact details

If you need further advice or support contact your GP or NHS 111.

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