Protect yourself from ticks

Sources: Jonathan Larson, UK extension entomologist and Anna Pasternak UK graduate student

Kentucky is an ideal environment for ticks as we have forests, humidity and a large deer population. It is important to take precautions to prevent tick bites, especially if you spend a significant amount of time outdoors. Ticks do not discriminate on location, and we find them in urban, suburban and rural environments.

The three most common ticks in Kentucky are the lone star tick, American dog tick and the blacklegged tick. Anna Pasternak, University of Kentucky graduate student who collects ticks for the Kentucky Tick Surveillance Program, is seeing lots of lone star ticks and American dog ticks this summer.

Ticks must have three bloodmeals to develop and reproduce. Those bloodmeals may come from wildlife, animals or you and me. The vast majority of bites from these ticks are just itchy nuisances that last between seven to 10 days, but a small percentage of bites can cause serious allergic reactions and illnesses.

You can identify female lone star ticks by the white spot on their backs. Males are reddish brown. Lone star ticks are vectors of human ehrlichiosis, a bacterial disease, and alpha-gal syndrome, known as the “red meat allergy.” All developmental stages of the tick will feed on humans, and unlike other tick species that lay in wait for a host, lone star ticks actively seek out a blood meal.

The blacklegged tick is the only species that tends to be active year-round in Kentucky, and it is the only vector of Lyme disease. Blacklegged ticks have a reddish-brown body, a dark head, long mouthparts and dark legs. Males have a dark plate that covers their whole body, while females have a dark plate that covers half of their body.

The American dog tick is the primary vector of Rocky Mountain spotted fever. It is reddish brown with mottled white markings on its back. Only adult American dog ticks feed on humans.

You can minimize your chances of getting a tick bite by not walking through or brushing up against high grass, brush or other tick-prone areas. You can wear a tick repellent that contains between 20% to 30% DEET on exposed skin and use a repellent containing permethrin on your clothing and gear. Wear light-colored clothing, as this makes ticks easier to see. Tuck long pants into your socks or boots to minimize the chances of ticks attaching to your pantleg.

Many times, ticks find their way indoors through our pets. Reduce your pet’s chances of attracting ticks by using a tick collar, spray or shampoo or a monthly “top spot” medication.

Promptly finding and removing ticks is key to reducing your chances of contracting Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Lyme disease. Ticks must be attached to humans for several hours before they transmit these diseases. While outdoors, you should check yourself and your friends, family members and pets for ticks every two to three hours and again after you return home. Some of the most common places to find them are behind your ears, hair, neck, legs and around your waist. If ticks are found, the best way to remove them is by using a fine-tipped tweezer.

More information on ticks is available at the (COUNTY NAME) office of the UK Cooperative Extension Service.

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