

Lyme Disease in Construction

Hazard Alert



Construction workers who work outdoors are at increased risk of Lyme disease. You can get Lyme disease after a deer tick feeds on you.

The deer tick is found in most of the United States. But the Lyme disease problem is worst in northeastern, mid-Atlantic, and north-central states: Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin.

Doctors on Long Island, New York, tested 396 building trades workers and found 43 had Lyme disease. Three of them had the disease long enough to need intravenous antibiotics for 6 weeks, costing thousands of dollars each. The rate of infection among the construction workers who worked outdoors on Long Island — 13% — was twice the rate for the whole Long Island population.

The Hazards

Lyme disease affects everyone differently. Some people get sick in about a week. The first sign may be a rash near the tick bite. Other people may not seem sick until months or years after a tick bite. The disease can permanently damage your nervous system and joints. Sometimes joint replacement is needed.

Protect Yourself

Deer ticks are tiny — the size of the head of a pin. The ticks are found in brush, woods, and tall grass. May and June are the worst months, but the ticks are active in all warm months.

Wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts. Put your pants cuffs inside your work boots. Tuck in your shirt. Light-colored clothing may make it easier to spot ticks.

Use a tick repellent. Spray a repellent with permethrins in it near the openings on your clothes, such as the bottoms of your pants and the waistband. Apply the permethrins once a month; they don't wash out every time. Do not use them on your skin.

On your skin, use a repellent that has DEET (N-diethyl-metatoluamide), but no more than 33% DEET. (For children, 2 to 12 years old, use 10% DEET or less and use it as little as possible. Do not use DEET on younger children or infants.) Be careful not to use too much of the repellent. Do not use DEET on your face or hands.

(In the United States, there is a vaccine for Lyme disease. But you must get at least 3 shots and the vaccine does not always work. If you are outdoors a lot where Lyme disease is most common, you may want to ask your doctor about the vaccine.)

(Please turn the page.)

Check for tick bites every day. After you have been outdoors where ticks might be, check all your skin and hair for ticks. Many people get a spot on their skin in 3 to 30 days after a tick bite. It looks like a small red bullseye that is spreading out.

Look carefully. Only 12 of the workers who had Lyme disease on Long Island knew they had been bitten.



Deer tick

(larger than actual size)

Remove ticks from your skin right away. Hold a tweezer on the tick as close to your skin as you can and pull. Kill the tick with alcohol and save it to show a doctor, if you can.

If you are bitten, see a doctor. Your doctor may want to give you a blood test to see if you are infected. (The Lyme blood test may not show up positive until 2 weeks or more after a tick bite.) The doctor may prescribe antibiotics.

Watch out in your free time. If you spend free time — hiking, hunting, camping, or fishing — in tick areas, watch out for tick bites then too.

For more information, call your local union, the Center to Protect Workers' Rights (CPWR) (301-578-8500 or www.cpwr.com), NIOSH (1-800-35-NIOSH or www.cdc.gov/niosh), or OSHA (1-800-321-OSHA or www.osha.gov) or go to www.elcosh.org.

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