

About Lyme disease

- Lyme disease is transmitted via the bite of an infected tick and can lead to serious complications including damage to the nervous system, joints, heart and other tissues.
- Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne disease in the UK and the Northern Hemisphere.
- Lyme disease areas of the UK highlighted by the Health Protection Agency (HPA) are: Exmoor, the New Forest, the South Downs, parts of Wiltshire and Berkshire, Thetford Forest, the Lake District, the Yorkshire Moors and the Scottish Highlands. However, the HPA also state ' Although these are high risk areas for Lyme borreliosis, any area where Ixodid ticks are present should be regarded as a potential risk area.'
- Lyme disease can affect multiple body systems and produce a range of symptoms. Not all patients with Lyme disease will have all symptoms, and many of the symptoms are not specific to Lyme disease. The usual incubation period from infection to the onset of symptoms is a few days to a few weeks but can be much longer.
- Generally, the first sign of infection is a circular rash. This rash usually appears within 3 to 30 days of infection. The rash often has a characteristic "bull's-eye" appearance, with a central red spot surrounded by clear skin that is ringed by an expanding red rash. However, not everyone one presents with the rash, or it can be hidden under hair or in an inaccessible place. Rashes can also vary from the classic "bull's-eye".
- Along with the rash, a person may experience flu-like symptoms such as swollen lymph nodes, fatigue, headache, and muscle aches. Left untreated, symptoms of the initial illness may go away on their own. But in some people, the infection can spread to other parts of the body.
- England & Wales: Figures from the Health Protection Agency (HPA) 'Enhanced Voluntary Surveillance Scheme' show a year-on-year increase in cases of Lyme disease, with a marked increase from 292 in 2003 to 867* in 2009 (the latest figures). However the HPA estimate up to 3,000 cases every year.
- Scotland: Figures from the Health Protection Scotland, where the disease is a notifiable condition, have shown a dramatic rise in infection rates from 28 confirmed cases in 2001 to 605* cases in 2009 (the latest figures). However, staff at Scotland's Lyme disease testing service believe that the known number of proven cases should be multiplied by ten "to take account of wrongly-diagnosed cases, tests giving false results, sufferers who weren't tested, people who are infected but not showing symptoms, failures to notify and infected individuals who don't consult a doctor".
- Ireland: Borreliosis is not a notifiable condition, nor is there an enhanced voluntary surveillance scheme. In 2007, 71 specimens, referred to the UK Health Protection Agency's Lyme Borreliosis Unit from Irish hospital laboratories, were confirmed positive for Lyme borreliosis. However, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), Ireland, considers that the incidence may be much higher.

- There's no sure-fire way to avoid getting Lyme disease. But you can minimise your risk by being 'Tick Aware'. If you work outdoors or spend time walking, gardening, fishing, hunting, or camping, take precautions such as using an insect repellent, wearing trousers tucked into socks (or wearing gaiters) and long-sleeved clothing to cover all areas of exposed skin, regularly inspecting for ticks and carefully removing any found.
- Pets are also vulnerable to Lyme disease and tick-control products can be prescribed by your vet.
- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) in the US state: 'Both false-positive (the test results read positive, but the patient is not infected with Lyme disease-causing bacteria) and false-negative test results (the results read negative, but the patient is infected with Lyme disease-causing bacteria) may occur.' †
- The disease is named after the village of Old Lyme, Connecticut in the USA, where a number of cases were identified in 1975.

* Provisional data

† Reference - CDC Lyme disease: A Public Information Guide.

