

What Do I Need To Know About Ticks and Tick Borne Diseases?

What are ticks?

Ticks are small, blood sucking creatures which feed on many different types of birds and animals, including humans. During feeding they can spread infections and cause disease. They are found in woodland and moorland areas and are most common from April to October.

They can also be found in parks, or in gardens where there is wildlife. The most common tick in Scotland is the sheep or deer tick. Ticks feed for several days then drop off into the undergrowth where they grow and develop, until they are ready for their next blood meal or to lay eggs. They vary from 1mm to 1cm long and have 6 or 8 legs.



Stages of a Tick's Life-Cycle

What diseases do ticks carry?

Ticks can carry many diseases that can affect animals or humans or both. In Scotland, Lyme Disease, also known as Lyme Borreliosis, is the most common disease transmitted by ticks. There are also other diseases which in the UK mostly affect animals, but which (very rarely) can also affect humans.

In other parts of the world, including other areas of Europe, ticks carry a variety of different diseases.

How can I prevent being infected with a tick borne disease?

The best way of preventing tick borne disease is to prevent being bitten by a tick in the first place. In humans this is simply achieved by ensuring that exposed skin which may come into contact with vegetation is kept covered. Long trousers should be tucked into socks and long sleeves worn. Clothing should be checked regularly and any ticks on it brushed off. An insect repellent may also be used.



Female tick waiting for a host

What should I do if I am bitten?

Not all areas of Scotland have infected ticks and not all ticks carry disease. Infected ticks spread disease because bacteria and viruses can pass from the tick to animal during feeding. This is more likely to happen the longer a tick feeds so check regularly for ticks, which may only be the size of a pin head, especially in skin folds like knees and elbows. Remember to check children and pets too. If a tick has attached then it should be removed as soon as possible.

This can be done using a proprietary tick remover that is sold by many vets and pharmacies. Ticks can also be removed

using tweezers parallel to the skin or fingernails covered by a paper tissue. Grip the head of the tick as close to the skin as possible and pull steadily. Be careful not to squeeze the body of the tick. Do not cover the tick with oils, lotions or chemicals and do not burn it as this may increase the likelihood of it passing on a disease. After the tick has been removed wash the area well.



Photo of Tick Twister courtesy of H3D



Typical tick feeding on wrist

What do I do next?

If you feel unwell or develop a rash around the tick bite then consult your doctor. A rash which spreads out from the bite could be a sign of Lyme disease. The disease responds well to treatment with antibiotics but it is better that it is treated early. There is no need to see your doctor if you have been bitten but have no other symptoms. If you do visit your doctor then remember to tell him that you have been bitten by a tick.

For more information on insect bites in general, see the NHS 24 website at <http://www.nhs24.com>