

LYME DISEASE – WARNING!

As many Bridgwater U3A members enjoy walking in Somerset both with the U3A, other groups and on their own, I wondered if you had all heard of Lyme Disease which seems to be on the increase. Recently I have read two separate articles warning of the possible problems concerning the disease which is caused by bacteria transmitted to humans as a result of being bitten by a deer tick. Apparently roe deer numbers have shot up from around 3000 to 9000 in Somerset in the last 10 years which could explain at least part of the problem. Mild winters have also not helped!

Deer ticks belong to the same group of invertebrates as spiders and mites, characterised by eight legs. Ticks are parasites with sucking mouth parts and when they are hungry they attach themselves to the skin and suck blood for food. Before sucking saliva is injected which contains an anticoagulant and if that saliva contains the bacterium infection is passed to the human. Deer ticks can be very small, the size of a pin head, and as they have hard bodies they don't swell up as do sheep ticks. Because they are so small, usually the first sign of a bite is redness and itching. If you find one attached to your skin, don't try and pull it out immediately as the mouth part is serrated and may be left behind. There is a special tool available from vets which does a very good job of removing ticks. Alternatively a dab of meths, a spirit, soap or scent will cause it to release its hold and then a straight pull with tweezers should work. They are quite difficult to kill but immersion in a detergent or meths should do the trick.

Initial symptoms of Lyme Disease may include a rash around the site of the bite, joint pain or swelling, flu-like symptoms, fever, heart arrhythmia etc. Long term problems can, very occasionally in extreme cases, lead to neurological problems including dementia and severe memory loss. I do, in fact, know someone who was bitten by a tick last September on the Quantocks. This person has reacted very badly and spent over 3 months in hospital and may never recover normal memory completely.

Simple precautions include NOT wearing shorts and sandals when walking through vegetation, but wearing strong trousers tucked into thick socks or boots. Mostly, ticks stay on vegetation fairly close to the ground, ready to hop onto a deer or a passing human.

Please don't think that every tick will give you Lyme Disease because that is very definitely not the case. Just be aware there might be a problem, take precautions, enjoy your walk but go to the Doctor if you have any of the above symptoms.

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