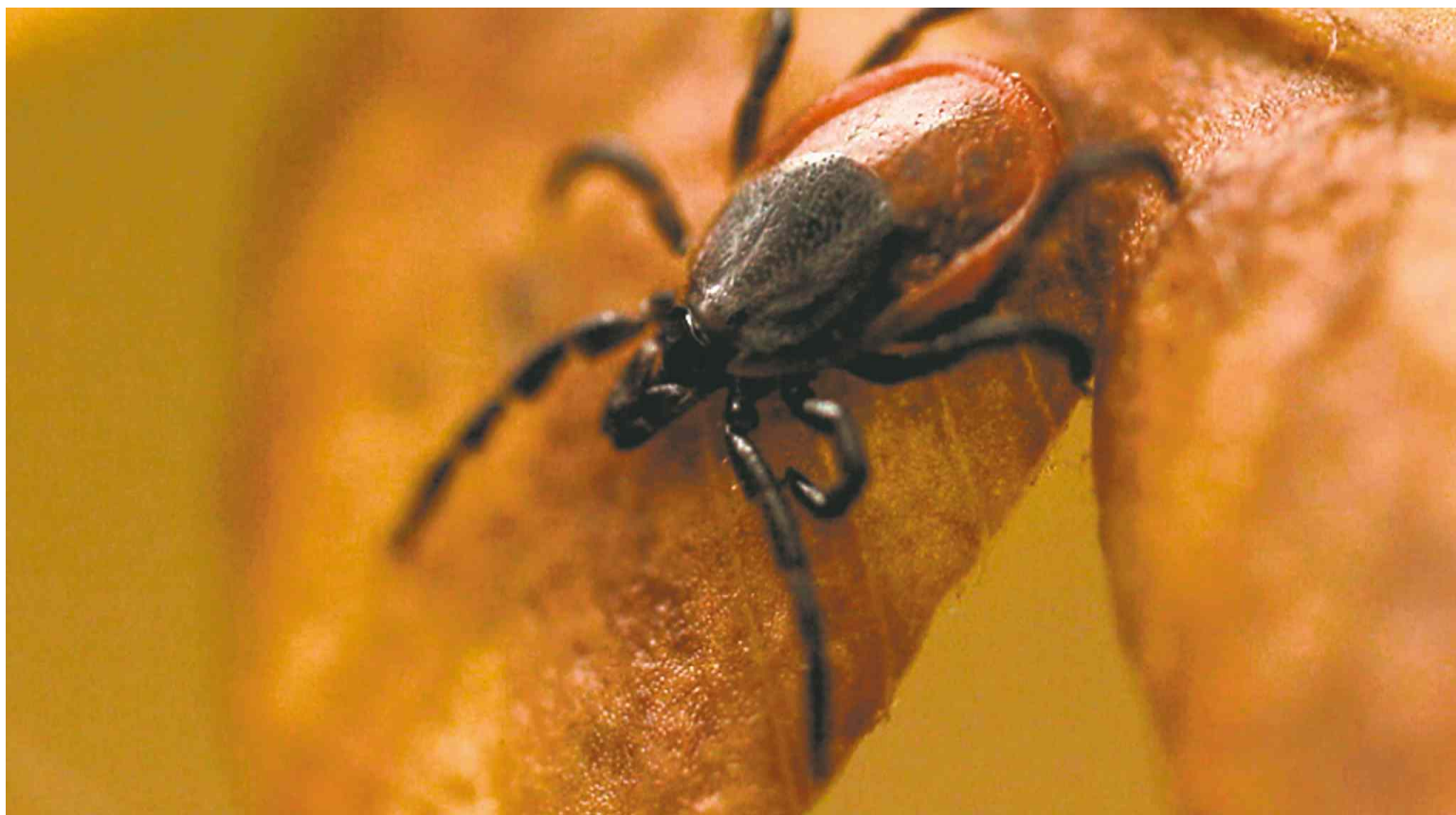


Local

Warmer weather brings need for Lyme protection

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GABRIEL LEVESQUE PHOTO

Deer ticks cause Lyme disease.

IT'S official — warm weather has come, and with it, our chance to enjoy the full beauty of Manitoba. It's time for camping, hiking, gardening or in my community, cleaning up the Bridgwater Forests from garbage that has blown in from more and more houses being built. Personally, it's my favourite time to observe the neighbourhood deer and young fawns. Unfortunately, it is also be prime time for deer ticks, and the perfect time to focus on preventing Lyme disease.

Lyme disease has been somewhat controversial in the past. At present, the importance of its diagnosis and proper treatment is becoming better recognized and with just cause. Studies have shown it's the most rapidly growing infectious disease in the U.S., with an estimated 200 000 new cases a year. Here in Winnipeg -- or what I lovingly refer to as the centre of Canada -- we are also a centre of deer tick activity.

Fortunately, there is something we can do about it.

The Ixodes tick, often referred to as deer tick or black-legged tick, frequents grassy and moist wooded areas, most commonly in early spring and summer. Its small size is disproportionate to the devastating impacts it can cause. Lyme can be spread through mosquitoes, mice and fleas, but the tick is the most well-known culprit. Since prevention is key, any outdoor activities, especially in moist woods or tall grasses, should come with precautions:

- Stick to main trails, away from tall grasses or low-lying brush.
- Wear light colours to assist in spotting those suckers, literally.
- Wear long garments, with access to open skin closed off. Ticks will hook on low, but climb upward towards skin and latch on.
- Consider insect repellent for exposed areas.

There are three stages of Lyme. If you think you've been exposed, time is of the essence. In Stage 1, which occurs the first few days after infection, the most common symptom is a bull's-eye-patterned rash, called erythema migrans. Yet studies show only 30 to 40 per cent of adults exposed report this characteristic rash, and only 10 per cent of children.

Stage 2 is characterized by flu-like symptoms from fever and chills to general malaise, with unexplained fatigue, weakness, joint and muscle pain, back and neck pain, nausea, light sensitivity and enlarged lymph glands. This takes place from days to months after the initial infection.

Stage 3 occurs after months or years of unrecognized or inadequate treatment. These symptoms have most startling effects on the heart and brain, causing everything from pressure in the head, memory loss and shortness of breath to potentially life-threatening cardiac arrhythmias, endocarditis and paralysis.

Although the best step is prevention, early detection and treatment are vital. If you believe you may have been exposed or feel you're experiencing the symptoms above, make sure you share these with your doctor. There are different tests that can be used to confirm a diagnosis, although symptoms are always a key component. I've seen patients ineffectively treated with antidepressants for memory, mood and malaise, when Lyme disease was later confirmed and required the use of antibiotics.

There is the misconception that Canadian doctors do not recognize Lyme disease, but this is not true. Several colleagues of mine have made the diagnosis needed for proper treatment. If that hasn't been your experience, it's OK to seek second, or even third advice. Above all, you know your body best.

When you're experiencing symptoms you can't deny, make sure to listen. The truth is, there's no denying Lyme disease has impacts on the body. Just as there's no denying it's spring now in Winnipeg.

Tara Maltman-Just is the executive clinician and licensed pharmacist at Vitality Integrative Medicine in Winnipeg.

www.vitalityintegrativemedicine.com

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