

GARDENING AND TICKS

Lately, ticks seem to be everywhere. And the news is scary, both in the numbers and the diseases being spread. But don't let the fear of ticks stop you from gardening this year. The Penn State Extension Service, the PA Department of Health (PADH), and the U.S. Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have extensive information to guide you in dealing with these pests. Their web sites are very helpful. Here are some of the highlights.

Pennsylvania has a lot of ticks due to our extensive hardwood forests, large wildlife populations, and our outdoor recreation opportunities. Lyme disease carried by deer ticks, also called blacklegged ticks, has grown to more than 15,000 confirmed annual cases in 2024 from 4,000 cases in 2010. The CDC estimates that the actual number of cases may be much higher due to under-reporting. PADH has identified five more diseases spread primarily deer ticks. What should you know?

A tick is an arachnid in the same class as spiders: Arachnida. Deer ticks are very small, about 3/16th of an inch as an adult, with 8 legs. They need blood to complete their life cycle. Ticks generally live in tall grass, weeds, and leaf litter, and wait for an animal to pass by. They cannot jump or fly. Instead, they crawl and reach out with their legs and grab a host. Ticks sense you by your body heat and smell. They are active any time above freezing and can live a year without feeding. They attach and bite and then may drop off after they feed.

PADH recommends "Protect, Check, Remove." First, be aware of ticks outdoors when you garden or recreate. Dress in light-colored, long sleeved clothes and tuck your pants into your socks. Treat your clothes with tick repellent. Treat your pets as well. When you return home, shower immediately and examine your body carefully, especially the back of your knees, private areas and scalp. Tick bites are usually painless. Prevention is critical. Wash your clothes as soon as possible.

PADH has a one page "Know the Facts about Ticks" you can print out. It states that ticks must be attached for 24 hours to transmit Lyme. It notes that while there is no Lyme vaccine yet, it can be successfully treated with antibiotics.

Often the first symptom to appear following infection is a red oval or round rash, usually appearing at the site of the bite but later may spread to other parts of the body. The rash can come in many colors and sizes and while it is often referred to as the "bull's eye rash" not everyone has a rash with that appearance.

If you find a tick, remove it. Grab it firmly with tweezers and pull up until it is free. Keep the tick in a small jar or tape it to paper in case it needs to be tested if you develop disease symptoms. Symptoms can include fever, shortness of breath, swelling, headaches and confusion.

As gardeners, we work outdoors and deal with leaf litter, weeds and insects. Deer often visit my yard. Ticks are in the Pennsylvania environment and we need to deal with their presence. I urge you to consult the sources mentioned to continue to garden in joy and safety.

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