

Lyme Disease and The Bruce Trail



Adult Female
Black Legged Tick

While you're out appreciating the beauty of The Bruce Trail it's important to be conscientious of your surroundings and anything that may present a hazard to your health. Most hikers are aware of the dastardly Poison Ivy, but you would also be wise to take precautions against Lyme Disease. This infection is caused by a bacteria spread by the bite of the Black Legged Tick (*Ixodes scapularis*), sometimes called the Deer Tick.

Ticks are close relatives to spiders and, with their eight legs, somewhat resembling them in appearance. They are typically small and flat, (1 to 4 mm in length), but can balloon up in appearance after gorging themselves with blood on which they feed. Blacklegged ticks are smaller in size than the common Dog

(Wood) tick (2 to 6 mm in length) and lack the white markings of this species. Females have a black head and shield with a dark red abdomen. Males are

entirely black or dark brown. Blacklegged ticks cannot fly and they move quite slowly, inhabiting the shrub and ground layers in moist, wooded areas or grassy open meadows with dense vegetation.



Ticks usually come in contact with people or animals by positioning themselves on tall grass and bushes and attaching themselves to their host as they walk by. These ticks are most active in the spring and fall but the possibility of coming into contact with them in all seasons exists. Most tick bites are painless and the majority of bites will not result in the disease because most ticks are not infected with the agent of Lyme disease.

Blacklegged ticks are commonly found in areas along the north shores of Lake Erie, Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, but populations have expanded into neighboring areas which could include the Bruce Trail.

Blacklegged ticks are also known to feed on migratory birds and as a result, they can be transported throughout the province. It is therefore possible for people to encounter Blacklegged ticks, or to be infected with Lyme disease from the bite of an infected Blacklegged tick, almost anywhere in the province.

Early symptoms of Lyme disease usually arise within one to two weeks, but can appear as soon as three days or as long as a month after a tick bite. If you develop flu-like symptoms - fever, headache, muscle and joint pains, fatigue and a skin rash, especially one that looks like a red bull's eye - promptly seek medical advice. The rash is the most reliable sign but not all patients

Typical bull's eye rash
of a patient with Lyme
disease



with Lyme disease will develop the bull's eye rash. A blood test can be done to positively diagnose the disease.

Following is a list of precautions hikers should take to protect against Lyme disease when enjoying the Bruce Trail:

- Wear light-coloured clothing. It makes ticks easier to see and remove before they can attach to feed.
- Wear long pants and a long sleeved shirt and tuck your socks into your pants.
- Wear closed footwear and socks.
- Use an insect repellent that has "DEET" (following the manufacturer's directions for use). Apply it to your skin and outer clothing.
- If taking your pet out on the Trail put a tick and flea collar on them and check for ticks periodically during the hike and immediately after.
- Avoid bushy areas and long grass if possible.
- Examine yourself and your clothing thoroughly for ticks when you get home from your hike. Pay special attention to areas such as the groin, scalp and armpits, as ticks are drawn to these sites. Use a mirror to check the back of your body or have someone else check it. Shower soon after being outdoors.
- Wash clothing and place in a dryer, as ticks can survive off the body.

If you find a tick on your body you should promptly go to a doctor to have it removed. This will help prevent infection, since transmission of the Lyme disease bacteria usually requires the tick to be attached for more than 24 hours. If you chose to remove it yourself the following procedure can be used for removal:

- Using fine-tipped tweezers, carefully grasp the tick as close to your skin as possible. Pull it straight out, gently but firmly.
- Try not to squeeze it. Squeezing the tick can cause the Lyme disease agent to be accidentally introduced into your body.
- Don't put anything on the tick, or try to burn the tick off.
- After the tick has been removed, place it in a secure bottle or canister and take it to your doctor or local health unit. They can send it to the Ontario Public Health Laboratory for identification. Establishing the type of tick may help to assess your risk of acquiring Lyme disease.
- Write down the date the tick was found and the location of where you most likely acquired the tick. It will help public health workers to identify areas of higher risk.



- Thoroughly cleanse the bite site with rubbing alcohol and/or soap and water.

Lyme disease in Ontario is a concern for everybody who enjoys outdoor activities but your chances of contracting it on The Bruce Trail are quite low and should not interfere with your enjoyment of the Niagara Escarpment. By learning how it is transmitted, what the symptoms are and how to protect yourself from tick bites, you can relax and take pleasure in your hike. •

For more information visit these
Lyme disease resources:

www.lymeontario.org

[www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/
publications/disease/lyme](http://www.health.gov.on.ca/en/public/publications/disease/lyme)

The medical information provided in this article is of a general nature and is not a substitute for the advice of a medical professional.

