

Lyme Disease: Is Your Pet at Risk?

Lyme disease is named after the town of Lyme, Connecticut, where a number of people first were infected in 1975. It wasn't until 1978 that the medical community determined that the disease was contracted from ticks, and in 1981, researchers concluded that the cause is a bacteria that infects certain ticks and is passed on when the ticks bite a human. Lyme disease was discovered in dogs in 1984 and now is present in all 48 contiguous states. Canine Lyme disease occurs when an infected tick bites a dog. It is not passed from other dogs or people. The biggest risk factors are exposure to infected ticks and vaccination status.

The good news is that there is a vaccine that can protect your dog. That is important for everyone in the household, because even though the disease is not directly contagious, you would not want a tick to bite your dog and also bite you or your children. And there's more good news - In most cases, Lyme disease can be controlled by antibiotics, but early recognition and treatment are extremely important. Delayed or inadequate treatment can lead to serious and disabling illness that is difficult or treat. The early signs of Canine Lyme disease include: Lack of appetite, lethargic, not playful behavior, fever, enlarged lymph nodes, swollen and painful joints, stiffness when walking, limping and shifting leg lameness.

Early diagnosis and, therefore, the most successful treatment can be challenging as these symptoms easily can be attributed to other conditions. Complicating matters further is the fact that Lyme disease is insidious,

and your dog often will not show signs until months after being bitten by an infected tick. Fortunately, there are several reliable diagnostic tests to check for Lyme disease including one that can give your veterinarian immediate results. Of course, preventing your dog from ever contracting the disease would be best and, luckily, there is an effective vaccine against Canine Lyme disease.

There are states in our country where the disease is endemic, and 75 percent of dogs that have not received the vaccination will eventually test positive, and each year, some of these dogs will develop Lyme disease. The disease is on the rise and spreading in other areas due to pets traveling and moving and because of the ongoing migration of wildlife. Your veterinarian can discuss your pet's risk for Lyme disease, taking into account where you live and your dog's lifestyle.

If you have ever found a tick on your pet or on your own body, then you are at risk. Certainly, living in an endemic area puts you at risk. Outdoor activities including hiking, hunting, camping, picnicking and fishing, also raises the risk. However, just living in a suburban area that is occupied by wildlife, including deer, foxes, raccoons, etc. places you at risk, as well. Tall grasses and brush in or around your yard are also risk factors. Depending on the risk factors to which you and your pet are exposed, your veterinarian may make vaccination against Lyme disease a core part of your pet's preventative health vaccines. This could mean starting the vaccine as part of a puppy series or vaccinating young dogs whose vaccine and disease status is unknown.

Many times, an adult dog is tested to see if he or she has ever been exposed to Lyme disease. If the test is positive, and your dog presents any of the symptoms,

treatment can be started immediately. If the test is negative or even if it is positive and there are no clinical signs, then it is often recommended to vaccinate your dog for protection. In that case, your dog will receive an initial vaccination and a booster in two to three weeks. Annual vaccination is then recommended to maintain immunity. Annual vaccination is an affordable way to protect your dog from bringing the disease into your household and putting yourself and other members of your household at greater risk, should an infected tick bite a dog and then a family member.

Vaccination is one part of a comprehensive plan to protect your home and loved ones. Both awareness of the possibility of infection and taking the time to look for and remove ticks from your pets or family members in high-risk areas is also important. Treating your yard if you find ticks is crucial and will prevent them from reproducing and spreading rapidly. Finally, using a preventative that kills ticks as well as fleas on your pets is very important. Your veterinarian can guide you in making the best decisions for your pet and your home. I urge you to have this discussion at your pet's next office visit.