The Lyme disease vaccine

Dear Alice,

I heard something recently about a new Lyme disease vaccine, and since I think Lyme disease season is coming up, can you tell me something about it?

?Tick-tock

Answer

Dear Tick-tock,

Due to low demand, the Lyme disease vaccine was taken off the market in 2002. A vaccine is still available for pooches, but people will need to take other precautions to protect against Lyme disease during tick season (April to July).

After being approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) in 1998, LYMErix was offered as a three-dose vaccine to prevent tick-borne Lyme disease. However, the vaccine was not 100 percent effective and only provided short-term protection against the disease. That means people who were vaccinated are no longer immune to Lyme disease.

Given these limitations, prevention is the best bet for most people. Ticks like to hang out in habitats that have woods, shrubs, and/or tall grass, especially in the Northeastern, Midwestern, and North-central states. If you plan to spend time in tick-infested areas during the high season, here are some ways to protect yourself from these pesky bugs:

- Dress in light-colored apparel (to be able to see ticks more clearly), made of tightly woven material.
- Wear long sleeved shirts that are snug at the wrists and tucked into pants.
- Put on long pants that are tucked into socks.
- Slip on high top, snug-fitting boots.
- Cover your head with a hat.
- Use insect repellent containing DEET on clothing and exposed skin.
- Apply permethrin, an insecticide, on clothing.

Each day after spending time outside, examine your clothes, skin, scalp, and hair for ticks. Buddy-up with a friend to check each other’s difficult-to-see areas, such as behind the ears, the head, and the back. It takes approximately 36 hours for an attached deer tick to infect someone. If you spot a tick, remove it right away. Use fine-pointed tweezers to securely grab
onto the tick's head or mouthparts (where it's attached to the skin), and carefully detach the whole tick without breaking it apart. Next, kill the tick by putting it in an alcohol-filled container, and then throw it away. Afterwards, cleanse and disinfect your hands, tweezers, and bitten skin. Avoid using petroleum jelly, burning the tick, or using other irritants to help dislodge it — all of which may increase your risk of infection. If bitten, quickly see a health care provider for diagnosis and treatment.

If you live in a region that's prone to ticks, there are several steps you can take to control the tick population around your home. Most importantly, keep your yard free of debris and moist areas where ticks thrive. Try to mow the lawn frequently and clear any tall grass that could be housing ticks.

For more information about Lyme disease and ways to protect yourself from ticks, check out these resources:

- The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Lyme Disease Page
- American Lyme Disease Foundation, Inc.

While the Lyme disease vaccine is history, you can still cover up to make sure that a pesky tick won't make you sick!

Alice!
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