

Ticks and disease

The growth of nature conservation areas, 'rewilding' in farming and deer population has resulted in a rise in ticks and the resulting Lyme Disease (Borellia) and other infections. Climate heating has brought previously unknown infections to this country.

The ticks that target humans are not like the large ones we prise out of our cats or dogs (see pictures below). Initially they are dark and very small – about the size of a poppy seed. Being of the spider family they have six legs and they climb onto you when you go through damp, tallish vegetation. They sit on the ends of grasses, bracken and other plants and get onto you as you brush past. They walk around you for two hours then dig their teeth in and start to suck your blood, which allows the bacteria, viruses and parasites that cause disease to get inside you. They can also cling to your clothes and get on to your skin later.

Lyme disease is the most common. If you don't treat it, this can be dangerous. It is caused by a spirochaete bacterium. You might recognise the name because a relative causes syphilis. The long-term symptoms are similar but luckily the bug is easily killed by drugs. Prevention is better of course, so if you are going into woods, long grasses or other wild vegetation it is best to cover your legs completely and tuck your trousers into your socks. You can spray exposed skin with a DEET insect repellent.

There are other diseases too including two virus infections called Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever (CCHF) and Tick-Borne Encephalitis (TBE). There is also a red blood cell parasite called Babesia or Nuttallia that has about one hundred species. The most infested areas are listed at the end. Ticks are also now being found in town parks, and are also increasing on free-ranging farm livestock as well as deer.

If you spot a tick on you don't panic. Usually only about 5% of ticks are infectious, and the risky areas with up to 10% are listed later. In any case, provided you pull it off fairly soon with a pair of tweezers or a tick remover you will probably be fine. Just watch out later for symptoms. Grip the head end so you don't squash the body and squeeze its contents into your body or leave the 'teeth' in your skin. Covid hand sanitiser or soap will then help to kill any nasties. When walking in rough country it is a good idea to put suitable tweezers in your pocket or bag, along with some sanitiser. It is also sensible to check your clothes when you get home.



This is the best style of tweezer for human ticks and will come with a safety sleeve.



The range of symptoms of tick borne diseases include:

- In most cases, a red circular 'bulls-eye' rash round the bite that increases in size. It can appear up to three months after being bitten
- High temperature or feeling hot and shivery
- Headache
- Muscle and joint pain
- Tiredness and loss of energy



Typical rash

What ticks on humans look like:



The second from the left is the most dangerous as it is easily missed and is about to start its life of blood eating.

Cat or dog ticks:



Be kind and rid your pets of them. They can cause depression, loss of appetite, fever, lameness and swollen and painful joints and lymph nodes. It's easy to do and saves a vet's bill.

Model aircraft flyers are probably not at risk on dry, mown grass areas. They might be if they go off into the rough to collect a stray model. I imagine that the insecticide sprays on crops ensure that there are no ticks there, but I don't know that as a fact.

Areas with higher numbers of ticks:

- Exmoor
- The New Forest and other rural areas of Hampshire
- The South Downs
- Parts of Wiltshire and Berkshire
- Parts of Surrey and West Sussex
- Thetford Forest in Norfolk
- The Lake District
- The North York Moors
- The Scottish Highlands.

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