



# The Ticks Are Back: Six Things to Know

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"The ticks are back...and they're hungry."

That headline from the Boston Globe (5/22) says it all. The warm spring is responsible for the infestation. This article presents six pieces of advice beyond these three usual cautions:

- Avoid tall grass and shrubs
- Wear long pants and tuck them into your socks
- If you get bitten, watch out for a bullseye rash

Our article today focuses on lesser-known tick factoids. This list will sound scary, but keep in mind that millions of us are bitten by ticks every year. Yet only a small percentage of people who are bitten end up with an illness as a result. Still, the consequences of a tickborne illness can be severe, so it pays to heed this advice.

## **(1) It is possible to buy tick-repellant clothing**

New technology allows permethrin, which disables ticks, to be woven directly into the thread of clothing. We rarely mention manufacturers in these columns so as not to be construed as endorsing anyone, but a company called Insect Shield makes a line of permethrin-infused clothes. ("We have you covered.")

There could be others as well, but this was the one whose apparel was used in the CDC testing linked above.

Does it work? Consumer Reports says permethrin-treated clothing “may” prevent tick bites. So the recommendation would be to wear such clothing in addition to the standard prevention techniques, but not think that such clothing provides a magic shield.

## (2) Bullseye rashes are highly overrated as indicators of disease

Many cases of Lyme Disease don't start with a bullseye rash. And there are about 15 other tickborne illnesses that don't involve a rash at all. So you can't assume that your COVID-like symptoms are not due to a tick, just because you don't see a rash and test negative for COVID and/or have been vaccinated.

Further, Lyme Disease is the most misdiagnosed common disease in the US. This is true in both directions. Some people are told they have it, but they don't. Others who have it are told they don't. So always get a second or even third opinion. You can google on the phrase “Lyme-literate” to find doctors who promote their knowledge of Lyme Disease, but there is no guarantee they will be right.

## (3) Keep the tick, in case you get sick

That rhyme is an easy memory device. Don't flush it. Don't squish it. Don't send it to that kid who used to steal your lunch money. Keep it in a jar with a couple of small air holes and a leaf.

Two reasons for that precaution. First, while many people can distinguish a wood tick from a deer tick just by size, a small wood tick is not easily distinguishable from a large deer tick.

It makes a huge difference which type of tick it is. Those two types of ticks carry different diseases that require different medicines. Wood ticks are quite unlikely to make you sick in the first place, other than a local infection at the site.

The second reason is that it is possible in some cases to figure out which tickborne illness you have by sending the tick itself to a lab. Many labs are listed here but other things equal, the closer ones will have more experience with local ticks.

Knowing which illness is being treated might allow a more targeted therapy. Smaller doses of the correct antibiotic carry less risk and will be more effective than large doses of a “broad-spectrum” antibiotic. The latter, being more powerful, carries more potential for risks and side effects, especially over the three-week course, the duration which is often recommended.



Don't send a tick to a lab until you really think you are sick, and even then only in consultation with your doctor. The cost adds up, and very few tick bites cause disease. The labs may be wrong, too. For instance, they may find one germ ("pathogen") that causes disease and assume that's the one causing yours, while overlooking the right one.

#### **(4) Buy special tick tweezers to get the tick out**

If you just try squeezing it out with your fingers or a regular tweezers, you are likely to squeeze whatever is inside the tick back into you. Other urban legends: you can't smother it with Vaseline. Holding a match to it may possibly work but will also burn your skin faster than you'd expect.

#### **(5) However you remove the tick, do it from the head**

If you don't have a special tick tweezers, keep in mind that the important thing in removing the tick is to get under it. A credit card or even two might help to lift it out. You try to squeeze the tick's "beak" with the tweezers or credit card and lift it out from below. [Click here](#) for more information on tick removal.

#### **(6) Tick checks should be done every day you are out in any field or on any path**

Ticks can't jump, and they don't swoop down on you from trees, but it is amazing how easy it is to pick one up when they are seeking a host, even if you think you are avoiding their habitat.

You also expect to find them on your legs, since that's the height of the grass, but most ticks will crawl up your body. You should feel your scalp and behind your ears. That is where your skin is thinnest, and hence where ticks prefer. Behind your ears is also slightly moist, which they prefer. They also like other moist places.

With the possible exception of heartburn ([covered in earlier editions of Well Aware](#)), tickborne illness is the easiest G-rated medical condition to prevent. Taking all these precautions should reduce your risk of tickborne illness this summer to near-zero.

*Want to test your knowledge of ticks and other summer hazards and enter a drawing for ten \$100 gift cards? Register to play this month's Quizzify quiz at <https://mass.quizzify.com/>*