While summer weather invites us to enjoy the outdoors, we’re not the only creatures who thrive in warm temperatures. Deer ticks, newly hatched and plenty hungry, are outside waiting to greet us. Humans can become infected with Lyme disease, a potentially serious condition spread by deer ticks. These ticks are very common in New Hampshire and spread the bacteria while in the nymph (juvenile) or adult stages. The nymphs are less than 2mm and difficult to see at such a small size. These ticks are most prevalent during the late spring and summer months.

Lyme disease was named for the Connecticut town in which it was first described. The disease has spread through the United States and is now found in the Northeast, Upper Midwest, and the West Coast. The population of ticks is growing in New Hampshire, resulting in more cases of Lyme disease. In 1993, just 15 cases were reported in the state. That number increased to 265 cases in 2005.

Symptoms commonly appear 3 to 32 days after exposure, although many patients cannot recall a tick bite. Most patients will start with a rash, which often resembles a bulls-eye. It begins around the bite site but may quickly spread. Untreated, Lyme can cause a multitude of problems. Early on, patients may have fever, swollen glands, joint pains, and headaches. Later, as the bacteria spreads, it may cause facial paralysis, central nervous system infection and heart rhythm problems.

Even though Lyme disease can be treated with antibiotics, prevention of tick bites is crucial. To prevent infection:
• Wear light colored clothing.
• Wear pants instead of shorts and tuck the legs into your socks.
• Wear insect repellent. DEET containing formulas are best. Apply to exposed skin and use 30% or less concentration. Do not use on infants under 2 months of age.
• Check skin for ticks frequently, every 2 to 3 hours, if possible and again at the end of the day.
• If you find a tick attached to your skin, it should be removed right away.
• Grasp the tick with fine-nosed tweezers as close as possible to the skin.
• Gently remove the tick by pulling straight back. Try not to squeeze or crush the body of the tick as this may increase risk of infection.
• Apply rubbing alcohol or antiseptic to the bite area. Do not use oils, ointments, or heat as a method of tick removal.
• Contact your physician to discuss any concerns and treatment options.

For more information and updated data on state and national Lyme disease trends, visit the web sites of the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services at www.dhhs.nh.gov and the Centers for Disease Control at www.cdc.gov.

Have a safe and enjoyable summer season!

Brenda Lawrence, MD and Jack Alexander, MD are accepting new patients at Elliot Primary Care at Londonderry, 552-1400. This article was first printed in Your Wellness Matters, Summer 2007 issue.