



Deadly Lyme Disease Takes Flight!

Robins and many other songbirds are often the heralds of springtime and warmer weather just around the corner. Unfortunately, a new report is stating these welcome spring visitors are quite possibly spreading a serious disease of humans and pets...Lyme disease!

When most people think about Lyme disease, they automatically think about the eastern seaboard of the United States. While it is true that states near Connecticut account for almost 90% of all cases reported, Lyme disease can be found in all 50 states and is truly a global disease.

Ticks are the primary vector for spreading Lyme disease to people and also to dogs, cats and even horses. Usually, ticks will acquire the disease causing bacteria by feeding on infected rodents, the primary reservoir. Deer also play an important role as expanding populations import large numbers of ticks into new areas of the country.

But now, researchers at Yale have found that robins, blue jays and other common birds are also reservoirs of this illness. Furthermore, the birds can carry the nymph and larval stages of the tick life cycle across distances and into the yards where pets and people often roam. What this means is that the heralded robin of spring could be leaving their parasite passengers and Lyme disease in your backyard.

Thankfully, transmission is fairly rare with only about 1% of all tick bites resulting in Lyme disease. But, human cases have more than doubled in the last two decades and pet cases, especially among dogs, appear to be more common as well. Dr. Michael Dryden, a well-known flea and tick expert, has stated that one reason could be a rise in tick populations due to more suitable habitats.

Furthermore, veterinarians are well equipped to discover and treat this disease. An in clinic test kit is available that finds antibodies to several tick-borne diseases, including Lyme disease. Animals with positive results are usually started on a course of antibiotics depending on the severity or even presence of clinical signs.

There is controversy, though, over the interpretation of the result if the pet tests positive but shows no signs of Lyme disease. The good news is that your veterinarian will understand the prevalence of the illness in your area and can help you make treatment decisions based on that knowledge.

Pet owners have several different options to help prevent tick exposure. Although tick killing collars are available, most people choose a topical “spot-on” type of medication. Products like Activyl® and Frontline® have shown good results by killing ticks before the bacteria can be transmitted to your pets. You should always follow your veterinarian’s advice for these products as some of them, especially those sold over the counter, can be harmful to cats.

Vaccines to prevent Lyme disease from occurring in dogs are also available. Like all vaccines, there is controversy surrounding their use, but some experts feel that vaccinating dogs in Lyme-endemic areas helps to minimize cases and reduce disease and stress in pets. These vaccines work by generating antibodies that can kill the bacteria while it is still in the tick! Newer recombinant vaccines (Recombitek® and ProLyme®) reportedly show fewer adverse reactions and a higher efficacy than older, whole cell vaccines.

And, one of the most economical and satisfying ways to keep pets safe from ticks is to spend a little time each day brushing and grooming your pet. Experts agree that the Lyme bacteria needs about 18-24 hours in order to transmit to your pet; so a little daily pampering with brush and comb could find ticks before they can cause disease!

Even though ticks might be flying into your yard, the protection for your pets doesn’t have to be “fly by night”. Working with your veterinarian, you can find the safest and most economical plan for keeping your pets tick free.

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