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Legislature Declares May 4-10 Lyme Disease Awareness Week

UKIAH, CALIFORNIA, April 15: In an unusual show of unity, more than half of California's legislators in both political parties have voted to pass a resolution declaring the first week of May Lyme Disease Awareness Week, according to Herb Dorken, PhD, legislative advocate for the all-volunteer nonprofit California Lyme Disease Association (CALDA), the resolution's sponsor. May 4 to 10 will be California's first Lyme Disease Awareness Week.

Lyme disease occurs world-wide and is a "hidden epidemic" in California, according to CALDA president Phyllis Mervine. Although Lyme disease-carrying ticks have been reported from all but two counties, many doctors are unfamiliar with the disease and reluctant to diagnose it. Farmers, ranchers, foresters, and others who work and recreate outdoors are at high risk for acquiring Lyme disease. Since birds, mice and many other animals carry the ticks, even city dwellers are not safe. Twenty-five percent of Lyme patients reported nationwide are children under age 15.

When Lyme disease is diagnosed promptly and treated properly, most people recover quickly. However a CALDA survey showed almost half the respondents had their diagnosis delayed 4 years because their doctors did not understand how to interpret the tests. People not treated early often develop chronic Lyme disease with crushing fatigue, cognitive dysfunction, neurologic damage, arthritis, heart rhythm irregularities, vision or hearing deficits, or mental problems. People may be misdiagnosed with chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, MS, or even a psychiatric illness.

The painless bite of the poppy-seed-sized nymphal tick is the cause of most human cases. Half the people who come down with Lyme disease do not recall a tick bite.

"Nymphs hatch out in the late spring," Mervine explained. "They are common in leaf litter under deciduous trees, especially under oaks and anywhere mice are numerous. Sitting on downed logs is especially risky, since nymphal ticks climb up on them."

Many cases of Lyme disease occur in summer. Early symptoms include a flu-like illness with fever, headache, swollen glands and aching muscles. Some people develop a characteristic rash around the bite area.

Lyme disease may be complicated by co-infections. Ticks in California may also carry ehrlichia, a disease that also infects horses; babesia, a malaria-like parasite that infects red blood cells; and tularemia, or rabbit fever, a potential bioterrorism agent; and several other diseases.

Prevention is key to avoiding Lyme disease.

- Use sprays containing permethrin on clothing.
- Avoid tick-infested areas and check yourself frequently for tiny ticks for several days following exposure.
- Remove any biting ticks promptly, using tweezers or a special tick-remover.
- Do not twist, squeeze or mutilate the tick. Try not to get any tick fluids on your bare skin.
- Disinfect the bite area and wash your hands.
- Save the tick in a small vial or plastic bag in case you want to test it.
- Watch the area for any signs of a developing rash.
- See a doctor knowledgeable about Lyme disease if you experience a rash or flu-like illness after exposure to ticks.

CALDA is an affiliate of the national Lyme Disease Association and works with other LDA affiliates to educate and support people with Lyme disease. CALDA publishes a quarterly journal, the Lyme Times. Mervine will be participating in the Marin Human Race on May 7 to raise funds for CALDA. Donations are tax deductible. For more information, visit the CALDA website at www.LymeDisease.org.