May is recognized nationally as May Lyme Disease Awareness Month because of the increased risk when immature ticks emerge in the springtime. While many people know something about Lyme, there are many common misconceptions. Here we offer a few facts to correct the myths:

**MYTH 1: Lyme is an East Coast disease.**
- FACT: Lyme disease has been reported in all 50 states and on every continent. It is the fastest growing epidemic in the US, with new cases surpassing AIDS. In 2008, over 35,000 cases were reported to the Centers for Disease Control, but the actual number of cases may be 100 times greater. The incidence of Lyme disease in Mendocino County is as high as some of the worst spots on the East Coast.

**MYTH 2: Lyme is hard to catch.**
- FACT: The poppyseed-sized immature tick, or nymph, is so small that you may not feel the bite. Nymphs live in leaf litter in backyards, parks, and forests, feeding on common wildlife like squirrels, mice and birds. An average of 7% of nymphal ticks in Mendocino County are infected with the Lyme disease bacteria (ranging up to 41%).

**MYTH 3: Lyme is easy to diagnose.**
- FACT: The classic bull’s-eye rash is diagnostic, but occurs in less than 10%. Most doctors order a test so insensitive it misses almost half the cases. Lab tests cannot rule out this infection. A CALDA survey of more than 3,600 people with Lyme disease found that the average patient waited over four years, seeing multiple doctors, before being diagnosed.

**MYTH 4: Lyme is easy to cure.**
- FACT: Most authorities agree that early Lyme disease is easy to cure. However the very high failure rate of short-term treatment in later Lyme has led to disagreements. Some doctors believe chronic symptoms have psychological roots; others recommend long-term antibiotics and support patients’ right to choose. Scientific evidence proves the disease persists in spite of treatment and that extended treatment may be helpful.

**MYTH 5: Lyme symptoms are like the normal aches and pains of daily living.**
- FACT: Lyme disease mainly affects muscles and joints, the brain, nerves, and heart. It can mimic chronic fatigue syndrome, fibromyalgia, rheumatoid arthritis, lupus, MS, Parkinson’s, ALS, paralytic syndromes (e.g. stroke), brain tumors, ADHD, and mental illness. It can cause severe depression and has resulted in suicides. Almost 90% of CALDA survey respondents had to cut back on work, school and household activities.

**MYTH 6: My regular doctor will take care of me.**
- FACT: Most of the people responding to the CALDA survey reported difficulty finding a knowledgeable physician to treat them. More than half traveled over 100 miles or out of state to obtain care. Complicating the picture, most people with chronic Lyme also have at least one tick-borne co-infection, such as *Babesia* and *Bartonella*. Multiple infections suppress the immune system, making it even harder to treat the Lyme disease. Doctors know even less about these other infections.

*The author is president of CALDA, a nonprofit dedicated to advocacy, education and research on Lyme disease ([www.lymedisease.org](http://www.lymedisease.org)).*

Possible graphics


How to remove ticks http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/lyme/ld_tickremoval.htm


Protect Yourself

- Avoid tick-infested areas, such as leaf litter under trees. Avoid brushing against long grasses and brush on edges of paths. Don’t sit on stumps or fallen logs.
- Wear light-colored long pants and long sleeves so you can easily see any ticks.
- Tuck shirt into pants and tuck pants into socks.
- Use DEET on skin and treat clothing with spray containing permethrin.
- Do a thorough tick check upon returning inside and for several days following exposure.
- Check bedding for several days following exposure for ticks that drop off.
- Ticks, especially nymphal ticks, are tiny. Find and remove them before they bite.

Protect Your Property

- Reduce ticks on your property by
  1. pruning trees
  2. clearing brush
  3. removing litter
  4. mowing grass short, and letting it dry thoroughly between waterings.
  5. Move shubbery and overgrowth farther away from areas frequented by people.
- Make your property unattractive to animals that are hosts to ticks by:
  1. eliminating birdfeeders, birdbaths, and salt licks;
  2. erecting fencing around the property;
  3. clearing away woodpiles, garbage, and leaf piles;
  4. removing stonewalls that provide homes to wildlife.
  5. having your property chemically treated.
**Helpful link:** Tick Management Handbook at CT Agricultural Experiment Station
http://www.ct.gov/caes/site/default.asp

**BOX on symptoms**

Often the disease creeps up on you, with occasional short attacks of aches and pains, vertigo, nausea, headaches, etc. Between attacks you feel normal. You may not even connect the dots between the different symptoms. It can change with time and move around, so first your eyes may be affected, then your knee, then your stomach, then your heart.

The Lyme spirochetes infect the brain within a few days of the bite. Here is a short list of neurologic symptoms that may eventually develop if you are not treated right away:

- Insomnia
- Panic attacks
- Depression
- Bipolar
- ADHD
- Memory loss
- Extreme fatigue
- MS
- ALS