



Feature Column

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Keeping Your Hometown Healthy

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Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF)

Summertime is just around the corner, and with it comes the season for outdoor activities such as hiking, camping, picnicking, walking your pets and generally enjoying our beautiful state. Although summertime is the time to embrace the great outdoors, it is harvest time for ticks. Because we had a mild winter, ticks may be out in greater numbers than usual this year. This summer it will be especially important to protect yourself and your pets from these pesky parasites.

One disease associated with tick season is Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever (RMSF). RMSF is a bacterial infection that is spread by the bite of an infected tick or by the contamination of the skin with the contents of an attached tick when it is removed from the skin. RMSF is rarely spread from person to person. RMSF affects about 800 people in the United States each year. In Arkansas, the health department received reports of 128 cases from January 1, 1996 to December 31, 2000.

RMSF gets its name from the Rocky Mountain area, where it was first identified. The disease is found throughout the United States except in Maine, Alaska and Hawaii. Most cases occur in the southeastern United States, where the weather is warm and ticks are active. The spread of RMSF is caused by the American dog tick, the lone-star tick and the wood tick, all of which live in wooded areas or fields of tall grass.

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People with RMSF get a sudden fever that may last two to three weeks. They also may suffer from severe headaches, fatigue, muscle pain, chills and nausea. The most characteristic symptom of the disease is a rash that begins around the wrists and ankles and can spread rapidly to the rest of the body. Symptoms usually begin three to 12 days after a tick bite. RMSF must be treated with antibiotics promptly to avoid serious illness.

Anyone who is exposed to tick-infested areas or tick-infested pets is at risk for RMSF. Prevention and protection against ticks is extremely important. Environmental controls can protect you and your pets against ticks. Spraying the grass and bushes in your yard with a chemical solution recommended by your veterinarian or a home and garden center is often very effective in eliminating ticks and fleas in your yard. Thoroughly cleaning the inside of your home, including frequently cleaning your pet's belongings, eating areas and sleeping quarters can also prevent a major infestation. After you vacuum, throw away the vacuum bag because ticks and fleas can crawl out of these bags and re-invade your home.

When you go hiking, camping or out of doors for any length of time, take the following precautions:

- Avoid tick-infested areas as much as possible. Walk in the center of existing paths to avoid tall grass and brush.
- Wear protective clothing that covers exposed areas of skin, such as the arms and legs.
- Use insect repellent on any remaining exposed areas of skin. Be sure to follow label instructions and check with your physician before applying these products on your skin to avoid any allergic reactions.
- Wear light-colored clothes so that ticks may be spotted easily.

When you come in from out of doors, remove all clothing and wash and dry it at a high

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temperature. Carefully inspect your body and those of your children and pets. Remove any attached ticks. Be sure to use gloves or tweezers to remove and handle ticks. Grasp the tick as close to the skin surface as possible and pull straight back with a slow, steady force. Don't crush the tick's body. Dispose of live ticks by placing them in rubbing alcohol or flushing them down the toilet. After removing the tick, thoroughly disinfect the site where the bite occurred and wash your hands. If you get a fever, headache, rash or nausea within two weeks of a possible tick bite, see your doctor.

With just a few simple precautions against ticks, you can make summertime in Arkansas more pleasurable. For additional information, contact Dr. Tom McChesney, Division of Epidemiology, at 661-2893 or Laurie Lacer at 661-2184.

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