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[HUNTERDON COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT](#)

Highest Risk for Lyme Disease Starts Now

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Two out of three Lyme disease infections that will occur in Hunterdon County this year will occur during the next six weeks, warned John Beckley, health officer and director of the county health department. "We're now into the highest risk period of the season and we're urging everyone to step up their personal prevention efforts," he added. That is easy to do but it does require attention. "The best prevention is to check for ticks and remove them promptly," advised Beckley.

That recommendation by the county health department is repeatedly tirelessly, not only during this highest risk period – mid-May to the end of June – but throughout all warm months. Ticks will seek a blood meal and bite when the temperature is above 40 degrees.

But Beckley's department also has good news to share. The preliminary confirmed Lyme disease case count for 2007 was 260, continuing a multi-year decline. In 2006, the case count was 273. Looking back – with the exception of a slight rise during 2005 - confirmed cases plummeted more than 40 percent, from a high of 618 during 1999 to the 260 cases logged last year. In 2005, there were 366 cases, an 11-percent increase from the 329 confirmed cases of 2004, which was the lowest count in 11 years. Now, with the latest count, a new low threshold has been set.

In part, such trends of improvement in public health point to the growing value of building a strong public relations campaign featuring clear health education and awareness directives.

"When Hunterdon residents act on the information we provide, they become their own best agents in protecting themselves and the health of their families and friends," reported Beckley. "This includes not only Lyme disease but also other major public health threats such as seasonal and pandemic influenza, West Nile Virus, bioterrorism and any of the many naturally occurring diseases having the potential for wide-scale spread."

Likewise, it is smart for businesses to ensure that employees get the Lyme awareness message. "Whether acquired on the job or after hours, Lyme disease frequently results in lost work time and increased health care costs," said Beckley. "Employers are encouraged to check the county health department website for Lyme disease prevention information that can be printed and shared with employees as workplace posters and paycheck stuffers."

To reduce the risk of getting Lyme disease, recommendations from the county health department include checking yourself for ticks and removing them promptly; tucking pants into socks and long-sleeved shirts into pants to create a barrier between the ticks and skin; wearing light colors and tightly woven fabrics to help spot ticks on clothing more easily and to prevent them from getting through the fabric; wearing closed shoes rather than sandals when in a higher risk area; applying insect repellants containing at least 30 percent DEET when in areas where ticks may be found (be sure not to use DEET on children under the age of three and do not apply to hands and faces of children); staying in the center of paths when possible to avoid tick-infested areas including leaf litter in wooded spots and medium to tall grassy areas; and knowing what a deer tick looks like and how to safely remove it.

"We're stressing to residents to do thorough tick checks," explained Darlene Andes, health educator with the Public Health Nursing & Education division of the county health department.

"Areas to pay extra attention to are underarms, behind the knees, groin area, under the hairline and behind the ears." Also important is to protect pets with tick collars or treat them with one of the repellent products applied monthly to the skin. "This is the time of year you should speak to your veterinarian about these options," said Andes. "And by all means, keep pets off the furniture."

To ensure county residents get the Lyme disease message, the health department is taking various educational steps. For example, the Lyme disease action alert launched in 2006 remains available on the department website <http://www.co.hunterdon.nj.us/health/lymeinfo.htm>. The organization previously distributed mounted Lyme disease flyers to various public and private venues including physician offices, municipal buildings, veterinary offices, the Hunterdon Medical Center, public and school libraries, and outdoor supply outlets. Available, too, from the health department are tick identification cards that clearly display the various stages and actual sizes of the deer tick. Community and business groups can also request Lyme disease presentations offered by the Public Health Nursing & Education division. Throughout the season, the health department website will offer Lyme disease updates.

Health department representatives will also appear as guests on local radio and cable TV to spread the alert about Lyme disease health risks.

Hunterdon residents might also spot the "red alert" Lyme disease signs posted in public parks during the highest-risk period between May and July. The key message on these signs is simple: Check yourself for ticks and remove them promptly!

Combining epidemiological, entomological and communicable disease models, the county health department is using science to track, monitor and address Lyme disease across the county. "We analyze all the Lyme data we acquire," said Beckley. "This includes working with the state Department of Health & Senior Services to be sure we don't miss any important trends.

"In being thorough about this public health threat, we want to send a signal to residents that they, too, should be careful in finding and removing ticks quickly," Beckley added. "That will help continue sending our case counts in the right direction - down."