Ticks

By Ed Lentz – OSU Extension Educator – Hancock County

The past weekend of sunshine and warmer temperatures encouraged many of us to get outdoors and enjoy nature and observe the spring flowering trees and shrubs. The warmer weather also brings out another visitor that we may have encountered – ticks!

The Extension office has been getting calls about ticks and specimens brought in for identification since warmer temperatures arrived several weeks ago. Individuals have incorrectly called them insects.

Ticks are not insects but are arachnids (they have eight legs, insects have six). They are also parasites – a blood meal is necessary to complete each developmental stage of their life cycle.

In general, larvae and nymphs prefer to feed on smaller hosts, such as mice, and adults prefer larger animals. However, any may attach to humans.

Ticks do not fly or drop out of trees; they position themselves to hitch a ride when your legs or body comes in contact with vegetation. They will wait for a suitable host on tips of grass leaves, weeds and shrubs.

Ticks land on passing animals and people, climb until they find a good place to attach, and then feed with their piercing-sucking mouthparts. Female ticks can remained attached for seven to eleven days before dropping and laying as many 6,000 eggs, depending on the species.

There are three tick species of importance found in Ohio: American dog tick (Dermacentor variabilis), blacklegged tick, also known as the deer tick (Ixodes scapularis), and lone star tick (Amblyomma americanus). All three may carry pathogens that can be transmitted to humans.

In our area, the American dog tick is the most common and the largest. It is brown in color and about 3/16 inch long before feeding. Dog ticks generally reside along the edge of the woods in brushy areas, unmowed grass, or vegetation along trails, roads or field edges.

American dog ticks are active during the spring and summer months, especially mid-April through July. They may transmit Rocky Mountain spotted fever, a relatively uncommon disease.

Lone star ticks are slightly smaller than American dog, tend to be browner and have a silvery spot on the upper part of the scutum. Scutum is the shield-shaped area of the tick body behind the head.
Lone star ticks tend to be in southern Ohio, but may be brought into our area by migratory birds in isolated situations. They prefer shaded grassy and shrubby areas along roadsides or grassy fields.

Blacklegged ticks are the smallest and are relatively new in our area. They are dark chocolate brown in color and about 1/16 inch long. The rear end of an adult female will be red to orange in color. They tend to be found in woods and are most active during the fall, winter and spring season.

Blacklegged ticks may transmit Lyme disease. This serious disease may debilitate a person if not detected early and treated with antibiotics.

The primary symptom of Lyme disease is a large bull’s-eye rash (2 to 3 inches across) that develops at the site of the tick bite within 2 to 32 days. However, about 25% of infected people do not develop the rash. These individuals often have flu-like symptoms such as fever, headache, fatigue, or joint pain.

The black-legged tick is primarily found in eastern Ohio. It has not been detected in most of the counties in northwestern Ohio. The occurrence of isolated woodlots rather than forest land has slowed the spread of the blacklegged tick into our area.

Prompt removal of an attached tick reduces the chance of a disease infection. Tick attachment of several hours or more is often required for disease transmission. When removing a tick, use tweezers to grasp an embedded tick as close to your skin as possible and near the tick’s mouthparts.

Use steady pressure to pull it out straight. Do not use a hot match or cigarette to remove a tick as this may cause the tick to burst. Solvents or other materials should also not be applied to the tick to “stimulate” detachment. Solvents are ineffective and delay removal.

When in tick areas, wear clothing that makes it easier to see crawling ticks and remove before attachment. This would include long-sleeved shirts and long pants. Tuck pant legs into socks and make sure shirt tails are tucked into pants. Also, wearing light colored clothing makes it easier to see crawling ticks.

If using a tick repellent, make sure to follow the manufacturer’s instructions. Note that DEET formulations of at least 25% are needed to repel ticks.

Blacklegged ticks are very small and difficult to see. I take note of the date when I have been in wooded areas that may contain these ticks in case flu-like symptoms develop later (definitely see a physician if the bulls-eye rash occurs). Always complete a tick check after being outdoors.

Enjoy the outdoors but remember that tick bite prevention is the best method to avoid potential diseases and infection. Additional information on ticks may found at the