
New York City Dogs: Ticks and Lyme Disease

Rates of Lyme infection in dogs are “sentinels” of human infection. The more dogs with Lyme disease, the higher the frequency in humans.

by **Rona Cherry**



Benny, a Labradoodle owned by B.L. Ochman, was diagnosed with Lyme Disease.

My friend B.L. Ochman lives with a handsome Labradoodle dog named Benny, who was recently bitten by a tick and then diagnosed with a Lyme disease co-infection. But B.L. and Benny don't live in the grassy, tree-lined suburbs—or areas upstate where Lyme-infected ticks abound—they live on Manhattan's Upper East Side. And they aren't alone. Dogs in Manhattan are increasingly being diagnosed with Lyme disease or a related tick-borne disease. “It's become a gigantic problem in the last three or four years,” says New York holistic veterinarian, **Dr. Jill Elliot, DVM**.

How serious is the problem? “Lyme disease is one of the most common, if not *the most common* infectious diseases that affect dogs in the Northeastern United States, including the New York City area,” says **Dr. Richard Goldstein, DVM**, Chief Medical Officer at New York City's **Animal Medical Center**. “In New York City, Lyme infection is becoming steadily more prevalent, with up to a 20% infection rate in dogs in certain areas of Queens and Staten Island.”

Manhattanites need to take note: “Rates of Lyme disease, anaplasmosis, and babesiosis are significantly higher in Manhattan residents than in residents of the other boroughs,” reported **New York's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene** in a 2015 Advisory report.

Why? Dogs are fair game for ticks whenever they go outside in tick endemic areas, which means just about anywhere. Lyme-infected ticks have been reported in Westchester, Nassau and Suffolk counties and many counties in upstate New York, according to New York State's Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH).

That may seem surprising, since the disease is caused by a bacterium called *Borrelia burgdorferi*, which is carried and spread by the black-legged deer tick and there are no

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deer in New York City parks. But other animals play a part in transmitting Lyme disease. Ticks are carried by mice, squirrels, birds and, yes, even dogs who may have visited the country before returning to the city and its parks.

Summer is a particularly dangerous time for pets (and people) because ticks are in their tiny “nymph” stage (no larger than a poppy seed). They lie in wait in tall grasses, weeds, bushes and leaf piles found in parks, backyards and playgrounds. With their forelegs extended, the tick grabs hold when a dog or another host brushes past. The tick then attaches itself to the host’s skin and feeds on its blood. While not all deer ticks are infected with the Lyme disease bacterium, those that are may transmit infectious bacteria to the host during their blood meals.

Most cases of tick-borne illness are acquired in areas surrounding the city. “People come back from summer weekends out-of-town—whether in the Hamptons, Fire Island, upstate New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts or anywhere where ticks are endemic— and their dogs may have picked up a tick and brought it back into the city,” says Dr. Elliot. Adds Dr. Goldstein: “Close to 50% of all dogs in Connecticut, New Jersey, Long Island and the Hudson Valley region would be positive for Lyme infection if tick prevention products and Lyme vaccines were not used.”

Although information on tick populations in New York City is limited, according to the DOHMH, infected ticks were found three years ago in Pelham Bay Park in the Bronx and Clay Pit Pond Park and High Rock Park in Staten Island. However, in the years since, “you can find them in any grassy area where a dog runs, including Central Park,” says Dr. Elliot. Ochman, a digital strategist and the creator of pawfun.com, a pet-oriented blog, is convinced that’s where Benny was bitten. “There are lots of bushes in Central Park and he runs through them,” she says.

Prevention is Key

Prevention remains key in protecting dogs and humans against Lyme disease.

Rates of Lyme infection in dogs are regarded as “sentinels” of human infection. The more dogs with Lyme disease, the higher the frequency in humans, says the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

What can you do to prevent your dog from getting bitten by ticks? Unfortunately, no tick medication will stop a tick from getting on your dog. In Benny’s case, for instance, Ochman had used Frontline Plus, a well-known topical repellent, and he still wound up being diagnosed with anaplasmosis. One New York veterinarian told me that from March through October she simply shaves her two long-haired collies. “It’s easier to find ticks that way,” she says.

If you’d rather not go that route, there are liquid spot-on products, shampoos, powders, tick collars, oral medications and several approved canine vaccines on the market. One relatively new product is Bravecto, a pill given to your dog (six months or older) once every three months. “My clients are telling me ‘it really works,’” says Dr. Elliot. “I am recommending it up the kazoo. For those who want a natural alternative for tick prevention, *Dogs Naturally Magazine* suggests mixing 2 tablespoons of almond oil with a drop of rose geranium oil and dabbing a few drops on your dog’s collar. However, before choosing any product it’s best to consult with your veterinarian to craft a custom plan for your pet.

When you head outside with your dog, try to keep an eye on where your he or she is playing. Dogs like to romp in tall grass where the ever-intrepid and terribly tiny ticks can be found. Ticks that carry Lyme disease and other infections can also live under layers of fallen leaves, bushes that aren’t pruned, even yards where there are shrubs, bushes, hanging vines and woodpiles.



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MORE FACTS ABOUT TICKS

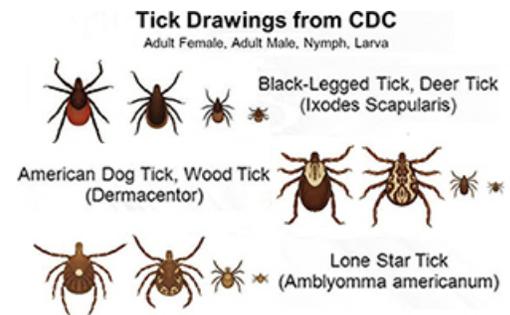
WHAT TICKS LIVE IN NEW YORK CITY?

There are three types of ticks that carry the diseases most commonly reported by New Yorkers. They are:

The American dog tick which transmits the bacterium that causes Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. Dog ticks are abundant throughout the five NYC boroughs.

The blacklegged tick or deer tick transmits bacteria that can cause Lyme disease, anaplasmosis and babesiosis.

The lone star tick, which transmits the bacteria that can cause the disease ehrlichiosis. Found for years mainly on Long Island’s East End, the tick has been moving recently into more populated Suffolk County communities.



Illustrations are slightly larger than actual size.

6 WAYS TO PROTECT YOURSELF FROM TICKS

Protect your pets, but don’t forget that you can be a tick victim, too. More than 329,000 Americans are diagnosed with Lyme disease every year. If misdiagnosed or untreated it can become a severely debilitating illness affecting multiple organs including joints, heart, brain and other parts of the central nervous system. To stay safe:

Invest in a good tick repellent. Studies show that EPA-approved repellents containing 20%-30% DEET, 20% Picaridin or 30% natural Lemon Eucalyptus oil are the most effective.

Be aware of your surroundings. Ticks are most plentiful in areas where woodlands transition into fields, meadows or yards. They are often found in tall grass, gardens, mulch beds, woodpiles, even coastal areas with beach grass. When hiking, walk in the center of trails.

Wear light-colored clothes so you can more easily spot ticks on you.

Consider wearing tick repellent clothing that’s treated with permethrin, an insecticide that repels and kills ticks. Purchase pre-treated clothing from a number of well-known clothing companies or you may spray your own clothing with it.

It's especially important to check every inch of your pet's skin and coat for ticks and remove them on a daily basis. Not only is this important for your animals' safety, but ticks on your pet can be a danger to you. "Dogs are often called 'tick taxis' because a tick can ride right in on your pet's body and move on to another pet, to yourself or a family member," said Dr. Elliot.

Don't walk barefoot or in open sandals except on pavement. Even short grass can harbor ticks. And spray your shoes. Most ticks crawl onto people from the ground. Spraying closed-toe footwear with permethrin is one of the best defenses against ticks.

Inspect yourself often for ticks. Tick bites are painless so it's important for you to perform regular full-body checks after being outdoors in tick-endemic areas. Pay particular attention to areas between the toes, behind the knees and ears, groin, armpits, navel, neck, hair and scalp.



"We found three ticks on our dog, Snicker Doodle, *above*, over the years," says Tamara Dosch, who lives in White Plains, NY. "Two were around his eye (one was attached and one wasn't) and there was one in his groin area. Thankfully he tested negative. But we always check in and around his floppy ears, around his eyes and eyelids, groin, toes, paws, and especially his face because dogs stick their faces in and under everything. We're also lucky because he's light in color so it's easier to see a tick on him versus a dark brown or black dog."

If you find a tick, remove it immediately, advises [Global Lyme Alliance \(GLA\)](#), the leading Lyme and tick-borne disease nonprofit dedicated to conquering Lyme through research and education. For complete instructions on how to remove a tick, [click here](#).

Upon removing the tick, place it in a container with isopropyl alcohol and mark the date on the canister; if your dog starts to display symptoms of a tick-borne illness, your veterinarian will be able to test the tick that may have caused it.

Symptoms to Watch For

Once bitten by a tick and infected with one or more tick-borne diseases, your dog can experience a variety of symptoms that you should watch for: lethargy, limping, fever, joint swelling and loss of appetite. But these symptoms don't always appear right away; it can take months for symptoms to appear. As soon as they do appear, contact your vet immediately.

Some pets may not show any symptoms, so have your pet examined by your vet if you've found an attached tick. Even if your dog is infected, you will not catch the

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disease from him or her. However, if left untreated, your dog may suffer from longer-term problems that may include diseases of the heart, kidney and nervous system. If detected and treated early, the better your dog's chances for a complete recovery.

To gain more information about Lyme and pets, a [Stop Lyme campaign](#) was launched recently by pet expert [Steve Dale](#) in conjunction with the [American Veterinary Medical Association](#) and the [Global Lyme Alliance](#).

Rona Cherry has written about health and wellness for *The New York Times* Sunday Magazine, *The Ladies' Home Journal*, *Vegetarian Times*, and many other publications. She was the editor-in-chief of several national magazines, including *Fitness* and *Longevity*. She is currently an editorial and PR consultant with regional publications and nonprofits.

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