

Are We In For a Bad Tick Year?

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

The media, including social media, seems to have been flooded with reports that we are heading into a bad tick year and an elevated risk of contracting any of the number of nasty diseases that ticks can carry. I'm somewhat surprised that I haven't been receiving phone calls about this. Perhaps the recent round of cold weather has tempered the concerns.

The first thing to keep in mind is that we live in a very large country and just as we saw this week with the snowstorm in the northeast, things can vary greatly as you move across the United States. Keep in mind that most of these predictions are coming from ground central for ticks and tick borne diseases, the New England states.

This forecast is based on statistical correlations that have been found between mice and the incidence of Lyme disease. As the mouse population increases one year, Lyme Disease detection increases the next year. Do I believe that the New England states could see an increase in new cases of Lyme Disease this year? Yes. Do I think that this means a bad tick year here in Kansas? No. But does this also mean that you don't need to be alert to potential issues? Absolutely not!

The most common tick that carries Lyme and other diseases in New England, the deer tick, is not a common tick here in Kansas. The incidence of Lyme Disease is also much lower here than in New England. Our primary ticks are the American dog tick and the lone star tick. Both species can carry diseases, including Lyme Disease, but the reservoir of infected mammals is much lower, their ability to transmit Lyme Disease is lower and so your risk is much lower. But there are several things that you can do to further reduce the risk.

It's actually quite simple. Just keep ticks from biting you. While ticks are starting to get active on the warmer days of late winter and early spring, they'll really get cranked up as we move into the late days of April and then on into May and June. Ticks like heavy grass and wet weather. Hot dry weather really slows them down. But you can find ticks virtually any month of the year.

When you are out, wear insect repellent on exposed skin. DEET based products work the best and most consistently. Eucalyptus lemon oil seems to be fairly effective also, at least against mosquitoes. Other homeopathic products simply don't work. Remember, we're talking ticks here, not mosquitoes. You can also use a permethrin based repellent on clothing. These products work quite well and can go through a couple of rounds of laundry and still be effective.

Ticks do not drop out of trees onto your head. They come off the grass and then crawl up. If you are in heavy grass, tuck your pant legs inside your socks. You may look like a nerd, but it really helps. Wearing light colored clothing makes it easier to see the little rascals if they do get on you. Once you get back home or inside, take the time to do a thorough tick check. Ticks normally crawl around for several hours before attaching and then it takes several more hours for them to attach well enough to start feeding and/or transmitting any nasty diseases. If you find a tick that's attached, grab it by its head with a pair of fine tweezers and gently remove it. If you start to have any abnormal symptoms in the following few weeks, get to a doctor immediately.

Ticks CAN carry some nasty diseases. We are learning more about them every year. But don't let them keep you from enjoying the outdoors. Just use some defense measures and keep checking for hitchhikers!