Don't let ticks ruin your summer fun

Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts offers safety tips to ward off the threat of Lyme disease

BOSTON — July 14, 2014 — In an effort to help keep members safe this summer, Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (BCBSMA) has released a list of safety tips aimed at educating its members on the harmful effects of tick bites, as well as the potential signs of Lyme disease.

"Studies have shown that Lyme disease is on the rise, and our members need to be aware of what to do when bitten by a tick as well as how to prevent a bite," said Jane Williams, MD, MPH, Medical Director at BCBSMA. "Our goal is to keep our members safe, so they can enjoy a long summer outdoors with their friends and family."

While most tick bites are harmless, several species can cause life-threatening diseases. Lyme is the most common of these diseases and is a multistage, multisystem bacterial infection. According to the Center for Disease Control, Lyme disease continues to be a rapidly emerging infectious disease, and is the leading cause of all insect-borne illness in the U.S.

What should you do if you find a tick?

- Do not touch the tick with your bare hand.
- Use a pair of tweezers to remove the tick. Grab the tick firmly by its mouth or head as close to your skin as possible.
- Pull up slowly and steadily without twisting until it lets go. Do not squeeze the tick, and do not use petroleum jelly, solvents, knives, or a lit match to kill the tick.
- Save the tick and place it in a plastic container or bag so it can be tested for disease, if necessary.
- Thoroughly wash the bite area with soap and water and apply an antiseptic lotion or cream.
- Immediately call your doctor to find out about follow-up care and testing of the tick.

Ticks prefer to live in wooded areas, low-growing grasslands, and yards. Depending on the location, anywhere from less than one percent to more than 50 percent of the ticks are infected with a disease. Although Lyme disease is a year-round problem, April through October is considered 'tick season.'

What are the symptoms of Lyme disease?

The list of possible symptoms is long, and symptoms can affect every part of the body. The primary symptom is a red rash which:

- Can appear several days after infection, or not at all.
- Can last up to several weeks.
- Can be very small or very large (up to 12 inches across), and may resemble a "bulls-eye."
- Can mimic such skin problems as hives, eczema, sunburn, poison ivy, and flea bites.
- Can itch or feel hot, or may not be felt at all.
- Can disappear and return several weeks later.

Several days or weeks after a bite from an infected tick, a patient usually experiences flu-like symptoms, and weeks to months after the bite, a patient may develop neurological symptoms, heart problems, eye problems, inflammation of the joints (arthritis) and extremity numbness, tingling and pain and difficulties with speech, memory, and concentration

How can Lyme disease be prevented?

Humans do not develop immunity to Lyme disease and reinfection is possible. Some general guidelines for preventing Lyme disease include the following:

- Dress appropriately by wearing:
    - Light-colored clothing
    - Long-sleeved shirts
    - Socks and closed-toe shoes
    - Long pants with legs tucked into socks
- Frequently check for ticks on:< >All parts of the body that bend: behind the knees, between fingers and toes, and underarmsOther areas where ticks are commonly found: belly button, in and behind the ears, neck, hairline, and top of the headAreas of pressure points, including:Where underwear elastic touches the skin
- Where bands from pants or skirts touch the skin
- Anywhere else where clothing presses on the skin
- Visually check all other areas of the body, and run fingers gently over skin.
- Shower after all outdoor activities are over for the day.

- Consider using repellents:
    - Products that contain DEET are tick repellents, but do not kill the tick and are not 100 percent effective in discouraging a tick from feeding on you.
    - Products that contain permethrin are known to kill ticks; however, they should not be sprayed on the skin, but on clothing.
- Check pets and children for ticks.

"Very often, diagnostic testing may not be necessary when a diagnosis can be made clinically in patients with a recent tick bite or exposure and the presence of the characteristic rash," continued Williams. "We want our members to know when laboratory studies are needed, most first and second line blood tests are covered. If your doctor determines treatment is needed, FDA approved medications are covered for our members."

For more information about Lyme disease, or tick bites, visitahealthyme, BCBSMA's complete guide to being well and staying healthy.

About Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts
Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts (www.bluecrossma.com) is a community-focused, tax-paying, not-for-profit health plan headquartered in Boston. We are the trusted health plan for more than 31,500 Massachusetts employers and are committed to working with others in a spirit of shared responsibility to make quality health care affordable. Consistent with our corporate promise to always put our 2.8 million members first, we are rated among the nation's best health plans for member satisfaction and quality. Connect with us on Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and LinkedIn.

For further information: CONTACT: Kathleen Makela (617) 246-7725 kathleen.makela@bcbsma.com

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