

Victims Share Stories on Lyme Disease Effects

Panel of experts recommends precautions.

By Reed S. Albers
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Mosquito and tick bites are common nuisances for those who enjoy outdoor activities in the summer, but as Manassas resident Becky Pannenton, 52, learned earlier this year, those annoying bug bites can lead to severe health problems.

"I just found out on March 6 this year that I had [Lyme disease]," she said. "I've had it for more than 18 years without even knowing."

Pannenton and other Lyme disease sufferers listened as elected officials, county scientists and representatives of Lyme disease advocacy groups held a town hall meeting on July 22 in the Centreville High School auditorium to educate citizens about the disease.

LYME DISEASE historically hasn't been a major issue for the Fairfax County area and is most commonly experienced in the northeastern United States. With approximately 400 new cases reported in Fairfax County last two years, panelists agreed it is time to take preventative action. "One of the steps I've taken to raising awareness is scheduling multiple meetings about this issue," said Supervisor Pat Herrity (R-Springfield). "There's been a doubling of Lyme disease cases in the county. My wife [was bitten by a tick] but we treated it. Not everyone is as lucky." Another panelist, Fairfax County Health Department Supervisor Jorge Arias, who has a doctorate in entomology, said that in 2008, 13.56 percent of black-legged ticks in the county tested positive for the bacterium that produces Lyme disease compared with 4.48 percent in 2007.

The bacterium that causes Lyme disease, *Borrelia burgdorferi*, is carried by black-legged ticks, also known as deer ticks, and transferred to humans through a bite contracted while outdoors. "[Ticks] wait in the grass for someone to pass by and then crawl up their legs," Arias said. "They don't jump and it's hard to tell they are on you. They're very sneaky."

Early symptoms of Lyme disease include headaches, flu-like symptoms and nausea, but in later stages severe psychological, neurological and sensory ailments can develop such as depression, blurred vision and memory loss.

Deer are the most common culprit for bringing ticks into the neighborhood, Arias said. "There are deer everywhere in this area, deer are the 'Metro' system for ticks," he said.

Besides offering Lyme disease information, panelists also discussed preventative measures. Vicki Monroe, Fairfax County wildlife biologist, offered tips for combating ticks.

"Keep your grass short and free of leaf litter, and keep playground equipment away from the yard's edge and trees," she said. "Always wear insect repellent, dress in long clothing when traveling through the woods and stick to the main trails."

Another preventative measure is to check your body daily for ticks. "Whenever you go out, check your body for ticks," Arias said. "You're either looking for a new freckle, or a new one with legs."

If there is a tick on one's body, remove by gently pulling it out with tweezers. "There's old wives

tales about using lighters, cigarettes and alcohol [to remove ticks]," Arias said. "They aren't true. Just use the tweezers."

The local health department or veterinarian can test the tick for Lyme disease for free, panelists said.

EVEN ONE'S FOUR-LEGGED friends are at risk, panelists said. Pets should be equipped with flea collars and have their fur checked regularly for ticks.

For those who do contract Lyme disease, the experience can be painful and frustrating. Lyme disease is a controversial topic as some physicians do not believe that it is the cause of extreme symptoms.

"No other disease has ever caused such a divide in the medical community," said panelist Debbie McCabe, director of pediatric and family wellness at the National Integrated Health Associates in Washington, D.C. "It is the great imitator and can cause multiple symptoms that baffle physicians."

Even the circular bite mark that is left behind by a tick can be misleading. "Some think they have ringworm, but it turns out to be Lyme," McCabe said.

Adding to the confusion is that Lyme disease screening is not accurate. The most common test, the enzyme-linked immunoassay test (ELISA), misses 35 percent of cases in the screening process, McCabe said.

For some, the effects of misdiagnosis can lead to years of unnecessary suffering.

"In the early '80s no one knew about [Lyme disease]," said Pannenton, whose 18-year misdiagnosis led to severe medical problems. "It started out with flu-like symptoms and then fatigue, then the headaches and dizziness came in," she said. "I suggested I had Lyme disease to my rheumatologist but he wouldn't discuss it with me."

Loudoun County resident Sharon Payne, 43, has suffered from chronic Lyme disease since 2005, and has found few treatments that help with her chronic body aches.

"In 2005, I was on an antibiotic treatment [for Lyme disease] that made me lose 35 pounds," she said. "I decided that wasn't the best treatment for me. I now use cold laser therapy. It's the same treatment that was used to treat [cyclist] Lance Armstrong [for cancer]."

Lyme disease can be treated, but there isn't a universal treatment method for those who did not detect the disease in its early stages, McCabe said.

VARIOUS OUTREACH groups also are available for those dealing with chronic Lyme disease.

Panelist Monte Skall, executive director of the National Capital Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Association in McLean (www.natcapLyme.org), shared information for those seeking help.

"I've had Lyme for 18 years and it gets harder and harder to deal with," she said. "I started this group because there was nothing out there for people with this infection. We now have five chapters in Virginia."

Support for those infected with Lyme disease isn't just coming from advocacy groups but also on Capitol Hill.

Dan Scandling, chief of staff for U.S. Rep. Frank Wolf (R-10), delivered some hopeful news that lobbying efforts are paying off.

"A \$6 million increase for the Centers for Disease Control budget will increase Lyme disease research," he said.