

With arrival of spring, Loudoun ramps up Lyme campaign

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Apr 22, 2013 03:04 PM EDT

The Washington Post

As Loudoun County residents welcome the arrival of spring — flocking to back yards, parks and outdoor events to take advantage of warmer weather — county officials have launched an initiative to raise awareness of the area's high rate of Lyme disease infection.

Hundreds of Loudoun residents are diagnosed with Lyme each year, officials said. The goal of the campaign is to lower that rate by educating people about protective measures they can take, how to identify early symptoms and what to do if they think they've been exposed to the disease.

The initiative is the most recent step in an ongoing effort to address the problem of Lyme infection in Loudoun. Last year, the Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to declare 2012 "Lyme Disease Awareness Year" in Loudoun and established a Lyme Disease Commission to implement a 10-point action plan to help fight the spread of the disease.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Loudoun has among the highest rates of Lyme infection in the country, and the highest rate in Virginia. Exposure occurs through the bite of an infected tick, often found in rural and suburban areas where wildlife is most likely to transfer the parasites to people. Loudoun has just such an environment, with its combination of sprawling fields, wooded parks and heavily populated neighborhoods.

The county has consistently reported more than 200 cases of Lyme disease per year, but the actual numbers are probably higher, health officials said, because cases often go unreported or are incorrectly diagnosed.

Although complete data regarding last year's infection rate won't be available until later in the year, David Goodfriend, director of the county Health Department, said at least 200 cases were reported in 2012.

The county's adopted 10-point plan included a number of fundamental steps such as outreach, education and a county Web site on which residents can get information. It also had some controversial measures, such as spraying parts of the county to help reduce the tick population and suggesting that the county compile a list of recommended doctors who specialize in Lyme treatment.

Last year, county officials had nine Loudoun parks treated with a bifenthrin-based spray. Some residents applauded the effort to reduce the risk of exposure to ticks in areas where children

played, but others, including beekeepers and wildlife enthusiasts, expressed concern about the toxicity to other insects and animals.

The county did not spray again in the fall. An evaluation is underway to determine whether the spraying will be repeated this spring, Goodfriend said. He expects the results of the evaluation to be presented to supervisors next month, along with the Lyme commission's recommendations.

Supervisors have budgeted \$100,00 — funds carried over from the fiscal 2012 budget — to cover the cost of printing materials, evaluating county parks for potential spraying and conducting spraying if needed. The county spent about \$10,000 on spraying at public parks last year.

In light of the disagreement among advocates and officials involved in Lyme disease treatment and policy, Goodfriend said that the commission would not compile a list of recommended Lyme disease specialists. Instead, the county Web site directs residents to the American Lyme Disease Foundation and local hospitals for additional resources.

Some Lyme disease activists, including Michael Farris, chancellor of Patrick Henry College in Purcellville and chairman of Gov. Robert F. McDonnell's (R) Lyme disease task force, have harshly criticized the methods of diagnosis and treatment supported by the CDC. Farris has sided with doctors who recommend intravenous antibiotic treatment as a means to treat "chronic Lyme infection." Officials with the CDC have say such treatment methods are ineffective and potentially dangerous.

The Loudoun Lyme commission has not taken a formal position on guidelines for the treatment of the disease, officials said.

"Our own health department is primarily focused on prevention," Goodfriend said. "What I've related back to the Board of Supervisors is we didn't feel that it would be appropriate for us to create a new listing of providers."

The county is also conducting a survey about Lyme disease that is open to all residents.

"It's helpful to find out what residents' knowledge of Lyme disease is and what behaviors they're currently taking to protect themselves, so that we can best target our education efforts," Goodfriend said.

In the coming months, the campaign will focus on community outreach and education. Officials will talk to residents and distribute information about Lyme disease at more than two dozen local events and fairs, he said.

"We want to get information to people at home, at events, through the schools," Goodfriend said. "We want people to know about this. It really is a countywide effort."

Information is available at www.loudoun.gov/lyme.