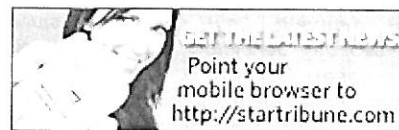


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## Lyme-carrying ticks go urban

The prime carriers of Lyme disease may be coming soon to a metro neighborhood near you. Formerly known as deer ticks and ranging across the central Minnesota lakes areas, black-legged ticks have been detected in all metro counties for the past several years.

They appear to be increasing their range westward across the metro, said Mike McLean, spokesman for the Metropolitan Mosquito Control District, which tracks tick populations.

Their metrowide spread was noted for the first time in 2007, then again in 2008 and 2009. They've been more noticeable in the northeast and eastern parts of the metro area than in the southwest.

That movement is probably the result of two things, McLean said: an increasingly close link between woods and residential areas, and mild winters in recent years, which have allowed mice and other small mammals, ticks' chief source of blood snacks, to thrive.

Ticks got a head start on their blood-sucking routines in this year's early and long spring. Still, it's too early to tell whether that will

mean an increase in cases of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases, said Dave Neitzel, senior epidemiologist with the Minnesota Department of Health.

Since 2004, the Health Department has counted an average of about 1,000 cases of Lyme disease statewide each year, twice the average annual number from 1999 to 2003. Cases of anaplasmosis and babesiosis, also transmitted by ticks, have risen sharply, as well, to about 300 anaplasmosis and 30 babesiosis cases in each of the past three years. And the first three cases of Powassan encephalitis ever reported in Minnesota occurred in the past two years. Minnesota has also seen its first cases of Rocky Mountain spotted fever in recent years.

Black-legged ticks have several life stages in which they can bite humans and transmit bacteria they've acquired from small mammals. In the nymph stage, when they do most of their disease transmission, they are only about 1/16 of an inch long.

People spending time outdoors can reduce their chances of being bitten by wearing insect repellent, a hat, long sleeves and long pants, and tucking pant legs into the socks. Even so, people should check closely for ticks that have attached themselves to skin.

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Black-legged ticks need to be attached for one to two days to transmit Lyme bacteria, Neitzel said.

The Metropolitan Mosquito Control District monitors tick populations, in part, by bug samples that people send it for identification. Bugs can be mailed to MMCD, attn: Tick ID Service, 2099 W. University Av., St. Paul, MN 55104.

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