

Expert Advice... Stay safe from ticks

Walking in the great outdoors has many health benefits, physical and mental, and is widely promoted as part of a healthy lifestyle. One of the small risks of walking in the countryside is the chance of being bitten by a tick. Here we uncover the truth about ticks, Lyme Disease and the precautions you can take to keep yourself (and your dogs) safe.

What is a tick?



Ticks are small, blood-sucking arthropods and look just like a tiny spider.

There are many different species of tick living in Britain, each preferring to feed on the blood of different animal hosts. The one most likely to bite humans in Britain is the sheep tick, but you may also come across deer ticks, hedgehog ticks and fox ticks. Despite their names, all ticks will actually take blood from a wide range of mammals and birds. Juvenile ticks can be as small as a pin head, while adult female ticks can be up to 5mm across (and the size of a pea when full after a meal).

How do ticks feed?

When ready for a meal, a tick will climb up a nearby piece of vegetation and wait for a passing animal or human to catch their hooked front legs. They then walk around the mammal looking for a suitable place to bite to suck blood. The bite is usually painless and most people will only know they have been bitten if they happen to see a feeding tick attached to them. If left undisturbed, a tick will feed for around 5 to 7 days (slowly swelling) before letting go and dropping off. Adults are most often bitten around the legs. Small children are generally bitten above the waist, including in the scalp and hairline.

Where are ticks found?

Ticks are present across the whole of the UK and live in areas with dense vegetation that retains humidity, including deciduous and coniferous woodland, heathland, moorland, rough pasture, forests and urban parks (they are even found in London's Royal Parks)...so all our favourite

walking places then. Cold temperatures reduce tick activity, so ticks are most active from April to October. During warm winters and in certain areas of Britain, they are active all year round.

What are the health risks?



Some ticks carry Lyme Disease and they can inject the bacteria into you when they take a meal of blood. Symptoms may appear between 2 and 30 days after the bite and include: feeling unwell with flu-like symptoms; extreme fatigue; muscle, tendon or joint pain; muscle weakness; stiff neck; headache; disturbances of sight, hearing, digestive system or sleep; and a 'Bull's Eye' rash (pictured). If you get a rash, photograph it for a record. Lyme Disease is treatable with antibiotics, but the sooner the better so don't ignore the symptoms.

Are ticks a problem for dogs too?



Yes. Dogs by their nature tend to walk through more undergrowth than us humans and also don't wear protective clothing so they are more at risk of tick bites. If you are treating your dog with a topical pesticide for fleas, don't assume that this treats ticks as well. Very few treatments are capable of stopping all tick bites so check your dog regularly (including armpits, ears and gums) and remove any ticks with a specially designed tick fork (see below). If you know you are going walking somewhere with high risk of tick bites (e.g. sheep pastures), then consider using a natural repellent that day to supplement any longer-term veterinary treatment. I mix a few drops of tea tree oil in an egg cup of water and rub this all over the dog's coat and have found that this works well as an extra prevention method.

What should I do to stay safe?

There are several things you can do to help prevent being bitten and also to deal with any bites you do get as safely as possible:

- 1) Try to prevent access to your skin (particularly on the lower half of your body) while out walking. Wear boots and shoes rather than sandals, wear long trousers rather than shorts and tuck your trousers in to your socks to keep your ankles safe.
- 2) Wear lighter coloured clothing so that any tick is easy to spot if one does hitch a ride.
- 3) Wherever possible avoid walking through thick vegetation, stick to the middle of wider paths.
- 4) If you are walking somewhere with a high risk of being bitten (e.g. sheep pastures), consider using a natural insect repellent like tea tree oil.
- 5) Check yourself for ticks whenever you have visited a place where they may have been present. Do this both immediately and for up to three days after any outdoor visit.
- 6) If you find a tick, remove it safely as soon as possible (see below for removal advice).

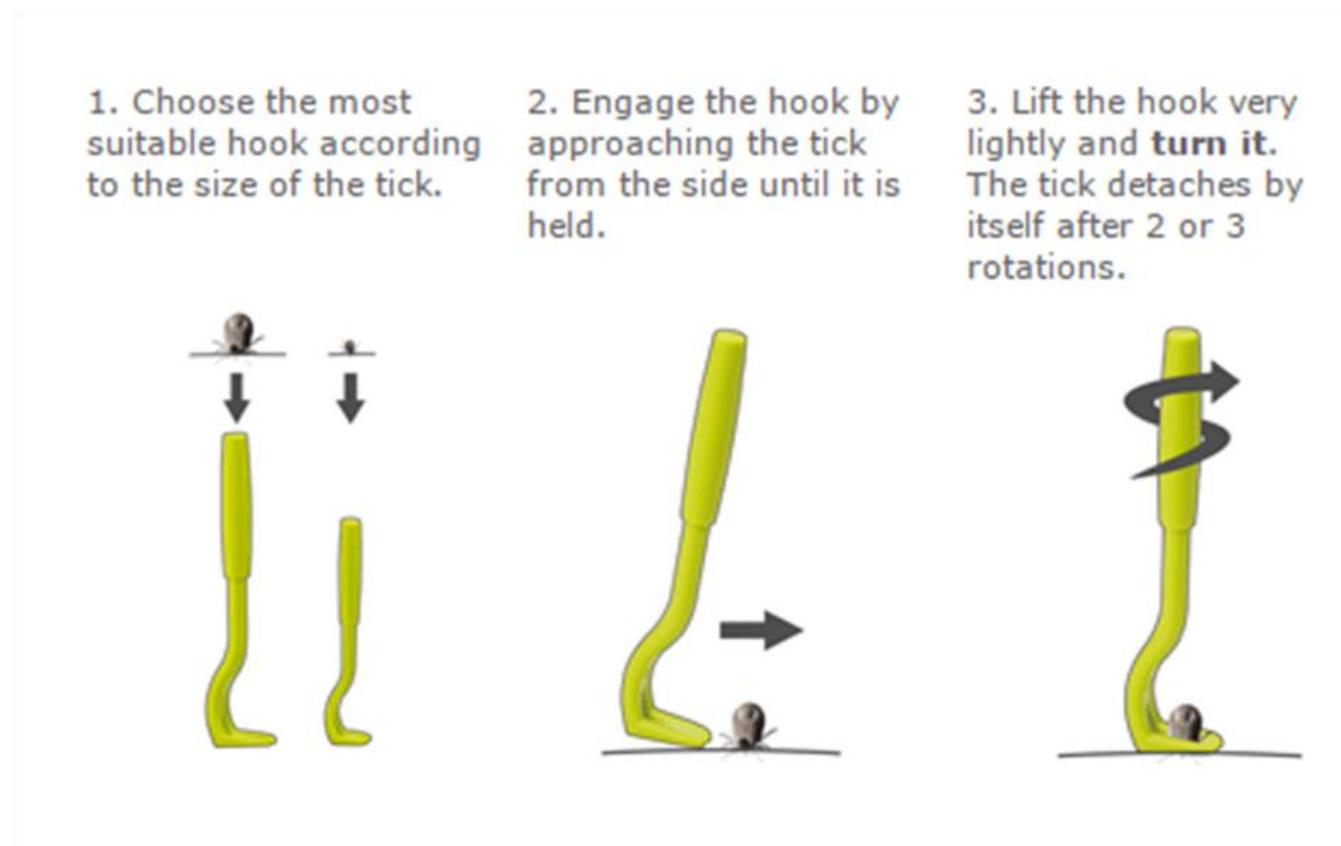
How do I remove a tick safely?

Removing a tick safely is key to avoiding the spread of disease and infection. Once a tick has bitten you or your dog, it will be firmly attached with its mouth parts buried under your skin. Your main aims are to remove all parts of the tick's body and to prevent it releasing additional saliva or regurgitating its stomach contents into your bite wound. There are many myths about safe ways to remove ticks including suffocating them with Vaseline, burning them off or applying other chemicals – ALL of these methods are likely to cause discomfort to the tick, resulting in regurgitation and increasing your risk of infection.



The safest and easiest way is to use a proprietary tick removal tool, or 'tick fork', which is a genius little device in my opinion. It is cheap (just a few pounds) and available from many vets, pet shops and online (from Amazon via [this link](#) or at Lyme

Disease Action via the link at the bottom of the page). I keep a set in the car, a set in my walking bag and one at home so I'm always prepared. Slide the fork over the tick and 'unscrew' it anticlockwise. After a few spins, the tick will easily lift away from the skin. If no tools are available, rather than delay use a cotton thread. Tie a single loop of cotton around the tick's mouthparts, as close to the skin as possible, then pull gently upwards and outwards. Flush the tick away, cleanse the bite wound (and the forks) with antiseptic and wash your hands thoroughly. Make a note of the date you were bitten in case you notice symptoms later.



Don't panic

Remember, the health benefits of walking easily outweigh the risks and a few sensible precautions are all it takes to reduce your risk of being bitten by a tick. Don't be put off the countryside, but be aware and be prepared. If you would like to learn more about ticks and Lyme Disease visit <http://www.lymediseaseaction.org.uk>