



The Barnstable County Cooperative Extension has laminated cards showing deer ticks and American dog ticks, both male and female at actual size.

Panelists warn Cape Codders about another year-round resident, the tick

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Expert calls ticks ubiquitous

Residents and visitors urged to be proactive about ticks and Lyme Disease

By Gerald Rogovin
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"Tiny Ticks, Big Trouble", the Orleans Citizen Forum at Orleans Town Hall Tuesday evening, drew a standing-room audience. But there were only about 60 persons -- all that could fit in the room.

Ticks love Cape Cod

That was unfortunate, for the six panelists had much to reveal to Cape Codders. Those present heard that "no one needs to tell you that ticks love Cape Cod. They're here year-round, and they don't let us forget it."

So said Brenda J. Boleyn, chair of the Cape & Islands Lyme Disease Task Force. She told the audience that 12 years after the establishment of the task force, "We're a model for the state.

Cape Cod leads the way in programs, prevention

"The state's Department of Public Health is sufficiently impressed with us that they have adopted our programs and materials against Lyme Disease. If only there were sufficient funds available, our model would be duplicated all around Massachusetts," she said.

Dave Simser, Deer Tick Project coordinator for the county Cooperative Extension, said that there are 10 species of ticks that carry Lyme Disease. The two most common on the Cape and both islands are the black-legged tick and the American dog tick. The latter does not transmit Lyme disease.

Ticks are ubiquitous

In surveys he conducts throughout the year, Simser has found ticks to be "ubiquitous." They have a life cycle of two years, from August to August, from larvae to nymph to adult. The highest incidence is the nymph stage, from mid-May to mid-August. "And 20 percent are infected with Lyme Disease," he disclosed.

Reported cases high for a small town

Orleans Health Agent Robert J. Canning noted that Lyme Disease cases must be reported to the state Department of Health. In Orleans, from 2005-2009, about 41 cases were reported each year. "For our small town, that's a lot. And we count only year-round residents. Summertime residents are not counted in that total, even if they contract the disease," he observed.

The total includes confirmed, probable and suspected cases.

Tick-related disease diagnosis on the rise

Diagnoses of Babesiosis and Anaplasmosis have begun turning up in recent years, along with Lyme Disease, according to Simser. Each is caused by a bacteria spread by deer ticks (in the case of Lyme Disease) and microscopic germs infecting red blood cells. They, too, are spread by the bite of an infected deer tick.

The growth in the number of such simultaneous diseases has substantially increased the patient loads of Dr. S. Gay Freeman, who treats humans in Harwich, and Dr. Robert A. Labdon, a veterinarian in Yarmouth.

Some still deny Lyme's existence

Each complained about the difficulty caused by this development because, as Labdon put it, "There are still people who deny that Lyme Disease exists."

Dr. Freeman decried infectious disease specialists at Cape Cod Hospital, some of whom "say there is no such thing as Lyme Disease. The Cape Cod health community is not Lyme Disease-friendly. Philosophy is winning over science at the hospital," she declared.

Forum moderator George R. Heufelder, director of the Barnstable County Department of Health & Environment, directed audience questions to the panelists for three-quarters of the program.

Among those relevant to the area were the following:

Q: Is there tick-repellent clothing?

Yes, said Simser. "Use 'dedicated' white pants, white shirts, boots to cover up. They can be effective for as many as 70 washes."

Q: How effective are repellents for dogs?

"They vary," said Labdon. "Frontline is safe and effective, notwithstanding some newspaper stories. But resistance is building, so I apply it at 3-week intervals. But you need to be careful. It's for dogs. If you use it on a cat, that could be lethal."

Q: Is there a vaccine for Lyme disease?

"It's a novel idea," said Freeman. "There have been trials, but favorable results were short-lived."

Q: Do ticks turn up in certain habitats?

"Dog ticks appear in open fields and on beaches," Simser pointed out. "Deer ticks prefer wetlands and swamps. Dennis Pond, the Punkhorn near Cape Cod Tech and Nantucket are notorious for finding ticks.

Deer tick nymphs turn up at ground levels, seeking mice or chipmunks to grab onto. If a human is nearby, they move up from your feet. They don't drop from the trees."

Q: How do I know my dog has been bitten by a tick?

"Be alert to lethargy or anorexia in the animal," Labdon said. "Is he off his feed? Or favoring a leg, febrile? Sometimes there are no symptoms. Whatever the case," he suggested, "get your pet to a veterinarian in a hurry."

Q: What is the state's policy on Lyme disease?

It is getting better, Boleyn said. "When we started out 12 years ago, I would describe their attitude as indifferent. They were more interested in mosquito-borne diseases. Today they understand. But funding is tight. So they, like other states, are limited in what they can do."

Gerald Rogovin began as a journalist in 1948 in dailies, weeklies, radio and magazines; and in the past 9 years back to weeklies and magazines. In between, for 36 years, he headed his own public relations firm in Boston. He lives in Yarmouth Port with a skepticism confirmed by 60 years in the inky trade.

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