



Anyone who lives where ticks are found is familiar with the dangers of Lyme disease to humans. But we don't hear as much about it in connection with cats. The fact is, though you may wonder and worry about your cat contracting Lyme disease, it appears felines are less vulnerable to the infection than we are.

Lyme disease is caused by a bacterium called *Borrelia burgdorferi*, which is found in infected blacklegged deer ticks in both the US and Canada. In the US alone, the number of human Lyme disease cases reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is around 30,000 each year.

In humans, if the infection is not caught early enough and treated with antibiotics, the disease can become debilitating. But Lyme disease doesn't manifest so severely in cats, says veterinarian Dr. Meryl Littman, professor of medicine at the University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine in Philadelphia.

"Cats don't usually get sick with Lyme disease even when they are exposed to the organism," she says.

WHY WOULD CATS BE LESS PRONE TO LYME?

Ticks infected with Lyme disease transmit the illness by biting. The infection enters the body through the blood, which the ticks feed on. It takes two to four days for a tick to transmit Lyme disease into a cat, says Dr. Littman, but since cats are fastidious groomers, it is likely they remove the ticks before the infection can get into their bodies.

Dr. Littman adds that it also possible cats may be naturally resistant to getting ill from Lyme, in the same way they are resistant to getting sick from leptospirosis, a disease caused by a bacteria from the same class that causes Lyme.

But just because cats usually don't get sick from Lyme disease, that doesn't mean they don't get exposed to it. Some cats found with ticks, and who have symptoms such as fever and lethargy, have been found to test positive for Lyme. However, testing positive only proves exposure, says Dr. Littman. It doesn't prove that any signs of illness are due to Lyme. (No specific Lyme disease test is available for cats.) Even treatment with the antibiotic doxycycline doesn't prove the cause of illness to be Lyme, Dr. Littman notes, since doxycycline treats many other kinds of infection and has anti-inflammatory and anti-arthritis properties that may help an ill cat feel better, whether she has Lyme or not.

However, not everyone agrees that cats aren't susceptible to Lyme. Veterinarian Dr. Cathy Alinovi, owner of Healthy PAWSibilities, an integrative veterinary clinic in northwestern Indiana, is not convinced that cats are unaffected by the disease. "Cats just don't show clinical signs as obviously as dogs, so they are dismissed as being Lyme patients, in my opinion," she says.

PROTECTION IS IMPORTANT

While cats may not be in as much danger from Lyme disease as humans are, it is still important to make sure they are protected against ticks, says veterinarian Dr. Lisa Feinstein of Plantation Animal Hospital in South Florida. Ticks carry other diseases that can make cats very sick, such as cytauxzoonosis, also known as bobcat fever, which is frequently fatal.

- Limit your cat's exposure to ticks by keeping him indoors and away from long grass or wooded areas, where the parasites are most often to be found.
- Topical tick prevention can be achieved with natural products. Veterinarian Dr. Cindy Kneebone of the East York Animal Clinic Holistic Centre in Toronto, says she soaks collars with an herbal formula that includes vodka, lavender and rose geranium. The collar is placed on the cat after the mixture has dried, and effectively repels ticks.
- The best way to prevent your cat from getting Lyme disease is through diet, says Dr. Alinovi. "Great food is my number one treatment to boost the immune system in any of my patients," she says. "Food is the primary input to everything – from the nervous system to the immune system. So if we can feed the highest quality foods, our cats will have the best immune systems possible."

Dr. Alinovi recommends feeding cats a primarily meat diet (raw, cooked or canned) made from the highest quality ingredients. For cats hooked on dry foods, she suggests looking for products that list whole meat as one of the first ingredients.

- For cats that have been exposed to Lyme, Dr. Alinovi uses a combination of antibacterial and anti-parasitic herbs. For anti-parasitic herbs, she recommends artemisia, pumpkin seeds and stinging nettle. Antibacterial herbs include neem, noni, coptis and goldenseal.

CATS DON'T USUALLY GET SICK WITH LYME DISEASE EVEN WHEN THEY ARE EXPOSED TO THE ORGANISM."

Dr. Alinovi cautions that this treatment is not as easy as it sounds, because cats are not always cooperative medicine-takers, and because the herbs required are not available in the smaller doses cats need. "One human size capsule is six to eight doses for a cat," she cautions. Dr. Alinovi usually opens a capsule, mixes the contents with water or chicken broth, then syringes the appropriate dose into her feline patient's mouths.

While Lyme disease isn't a major issue for most cats, it's nevertheless a good idea to know something about it, and more importantly, how to protect your kitty from tick exposure and potential infection. ●



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By Stephanie Bouchard

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