

Choosing Wisely[®]

An initiative of the ABIM Foundation

ConsumerReportsHealth



AMERICAN COLLEGE
OF RHEUMATOLOGY
EDUCATION • TREATMENT • RESEARCH



Tests for Lyme disease

When you need them—and when you don't

Lyme disease is usually caused by a bite from a deer tick. The disease can cause joint pain, aching muscles, and a tired feeling. There are two blood tests for Lyme disease, but usually you do not need them. Here's why:

You do not usually need tests to show that you have Lyme disease.

In most cases, there's a clear sign of Lyme disease—a painless, spreading rash that often grows to look like a bull's eye. If you have this rash, and you recently had a tick bite or were in an area known for Lyme disease, you don't need a test. Instead, your doctor can just start treating you with antibiotics, as appropriate.

You do not usually need tests if you have vague aches and pains.

Some people get the blood tests for Lyme disease because they feel achy and tired. These symptoms are very common and often come from arthritis, depression, the flu, or other causes. If you only have these vague symptoms, Lyme disease is not usually the cause.



The blood tests can have false positives.

The blood tests can trigger false positives, suggesting that you have the disease when you really don't. This can happen in up to one out of four tests.

This can lead to unnecessary treatment with antibiotics. These drugs are usually safe, but they sometimes cause side effects, such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and increased sensitivity of the skin to sunlight. In rare cases, they can even cause dangerous allergic reactions.

Using too many antibiotics can also lead to the growth of drug-resistant bacteria. This means that bacteria in your body may get stronger and more difficult to treat in the future.

A false positive can also lead to more unneeded blood tests, urine tests, x-rays, and doctor visits.

If you have a false positive, you may not get treated for the real cause of your pain. For example, rheumatoid arthritis is a disease that causes joint pain. It can lead to permanent and severe joint damage if you do not start taking the right medicines as early as possible.

The blood tests can be a waste of money.

The blood tests for Lyme disease cost about \$230, according to HealthcareBlueBook.com, in addition to the cost of your doctor's appointment. And if you have a false positive, you may also waste money on unneeded treatments.

So when do you need blood tests for Lyme disease?

In some cases, you can have Lyme disease without the rash. Or you may not see the rash before it goes away on its own.

In these cases, your doctor should ask you about your medical history and do a thorough physical exam. Your doctor should look for these signs that you might have Lyme disease:

- You were in an area with ticks and Lyme disease.
- You also have fever or redness, warmth, and swelling in one or a few joints at a time—usually the knees, shoulders, or wrists.

Other symptoms can occur later on. Talk to your doctor about testing and treatment choices.

This report is for you to use when talking with your health-care provider. It is not a substitute for medical advice and treatment. Use of this report is at your own risk.

© 2013 Consumer Reports. Developed in cooperation with the American College of Rheumatology. To learn more about the sources used in this report and terms and conditions of use, visit ConsumerHealthChoices.org/about-us/.

Advice from Consumer Reports

How can you avoid Lyme disease?

The following steps can help prevent tick bites:

Stay away from ticks. Avoid wooded and bushy areas with high grass and leaf-covered ground. Ticks are most common in late spring and summer. Walk in the middle of the trail.



Recognize ticks: Deer ticks are dark and small, about the size of a sesame seed.

If you are in an area with ticks:

Cover up.

- Wear long pants, long-sleeved shirts, socks, and shoes with closed toes.
- Tuck shirts into pants and pants into socks.
- Wear light-colored clothes to help see any deer ticks that may be on you.

Use insecticide. Put insecticide with at least 20% DEET on exposed skin (not on cuts or sores). Use products with permethrin on clothes, boots, and tents. You can also buy clothes pre-treated with insecticide.

Check for ticks.

- Check your body as soon as you come inside from areas with ticks. Shower within two hours.
- Carefully examine pets, coats and backpacks—they can carry ticks.
- Tumble-dry clothes on high heat for an hour to kill any ticks.

Remove ticks properly. As soon as you see one, carefully remove it with fine-tipped tweezers. Grasp it right where the head enters the skin.