Ebel: Lyme Disease Cases on the Rise in Licking County

Year-to-date, there have been 45 cases of Lyme disease reported to the Licking County Health Department. This is nearly three times as many cases than at this point last year-with 16 reported by July 2018. It is more than double the total for all of 2018 when there were 21 total reported cases.

Black-legged ticks, which have spread across Ohio in recent years, can carry the bacteria responsible for causing Lyme. Typical symptoms include fever, headache, fatigue, and a characteristic "bulls-eye" skin rash. Most cases of Lyme disease can be treated successfully with a few weeks of antibiotics. If left untreated, the infection can spread to joints, the heart, and the nervous system.

There is some debate about why the number of Lyme cases continues to grow in Ohio. The spread of black-legged ticks certainly is key, but where the ticks have been established, like in Licking County, the question is, "Are more ticks infected or are more cases being caught by healthcare providers?" My suspicion is that it is a combination of the two. Because Lyme disease symptoms are common to many other illnesses, including common viral infections, and because Lyme disease transmission is fairly new to Ohio, it is often mis-diagnosed and under-reported. Increased public education and provider awareness results in higher case counts, however, a Lyme diagnosis is sometimes missed until symptoms have progressed.

If you are experiencing symptoms of fever, headache, and fatigue, it is important to let your healthcare provider know if you have had a recent tick bite or a rash, so that information can be considered in their differential diagnosis.

CDC tick bite prevention tips:
The first line of defense against tick-borne disease is prevention by following these recommendations. To reduce the health impact of tick bites we need to increase awareness to our residents—both adults and children—and our healthcare providers, to achieve early diagnosis and treatment of tick-borne diseases.

Joe Ebel is the Licking County Health Commissioner.

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