LYME DISEASE IN NEW YORK STATE
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BACKGROUND

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection spread through the bite of infected ticks. The blacklegged deer tick is primarily responsible for the spread of the disease in the Northeastern part of the United States. The natural bacterium that causes Lyme disease is Borrelia, it circulates between small animals such as mice and the ticks feed on them. Ticks then spread the disease to humans and pets.

Lyme disease was first discovered in New York State on Long Island and in the Hudson Valley region. However, over recent years, the number of Lyme and Tick-Borne disease cases have spread to the northern and western areas of the state. New York currently has the highest number of reported (confirmed) cases of Lyme disease in the United States. According to the New York State Department of Health, over 95,000 cases have been confirmed in New York State since 1986, and 7,587 cases of Lyme were diagnosed in 2013.

The possibility of being bitten by a deer tick is greater during specific times of the year when ticks are most active. Young deer ticks, called nymphs, are active from mid-May to mid-August and are about the size of poppy seeds. Adult ticks, which are approximately the size of sesame seeds, are most active from March to mid-May and from mid-August to November. Both nymphs and adults can transmit Lyme disease. Ticks can be active any time the temperature is above freezing. Harsh, abundant and long-lasting snow cover provides insulation that allows ticks to survive through the winter.
Diagnosis of Lyme disease takes into account the following factors: history of possible exposure to ticks in areas where Lyme disease is known to occur; signs and symptoms of the illness; and the results of blood tests used to detect the antibodies to Lyme disease bacteria. While the impact of Lyme disease is widespread, a large number of cases remain unreported or undiagnosed.

According to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), as of 2012 there were estimated to be nearly 30,000 new cases of Lyme disease each year, however only 10,000 cases were actually reported. In 2014, 96% of confirmed cases were reported in: Connecticut, Delaware, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Vermont, Virginia, and Wisconsin.

The New York State Department of Health has also begun investigating other tick-borne diseases of concern to NYS residents, including Anaplasmosis, Babesiosis, Ehrlichiosis and Rocky Mountain spotted fever (RMSF). These other illness usually result in fever, muscle aches, weakness and/or headaches. RMSF symptoms include sudden onset of moderate to high fever (which can last for two or three weeks), severe headache, fatigue, deep muscle pain, chills and rash. The rash begins on the legs or arms and may spread rapidly to the rest of the body.
In order to focus on the growing epidemic, the New York State Senate created the Coalition Task Force on Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease in October 2013. The Task Force was created to improve prevention, diagnosis, and treatment, as well as make recommendations for the development of a State Action plan by the DOH to address Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease in New York.

In the 2014-15 New York State budget, $100,000 was allocated for the creation of the 21st Century Work Group for disease elimination and reduction. The Senate Task Force secured $500,000 for services and expenses to support its own recommendations. A bill was later signed into law to require a study of the severity, frequency of occurrence and likelihood of reoccurrence of Lyme disease, prevention, existing animal vaccines and potential human vaccines for various diseases including Lyme disease.

In 2014 and 2015 both Houses of the Legislature passed a Resolution proclaiming May as Lyme Disease Awareness Month in the State of New York. In the Resolution, the Legislature called on the CDC to reevaluate its guidance on Lyme and other Tick-Borne diseases and called on the National Institute of Health, Department of Defense, and other federal agencies to provide more funding for research on these diseases in light of the high number of cases.

In February 2015, the Senate Majority Leader appointed Senator Sue Serino, a former Dutchess County Legislator, as Chair of the Senate Task Force on Lyme and Tick-Borne Diseases. Senator Serino stated, “She will provide the leadership to continue to the Senate’s efforts to prevent the disease from affecting others and help those already afflicted.”

The Governor, the Legislature and the Department of Health are working together to provide state officials, local officials and residents with the information needed in regards to Lyme disease and the prevention of Lyme and Tick Borne Diseases, but the threat of Lyme Disease continues to grow and the need for more support and financial services is needed for statewide awareness.