

ORAH Info:

Lyme disease



Lyme disease is very difficult to study. Often we are working with educated guesses from reliable experts, but there is a lot of controversy at even the highest levels of veterinary medicine. With that in mind, here is some basic information along with our current recommendations.

Lyme disease is caused by a bacteria called *Borrelia burgdorferi* which is transmitted through the bite of the deer tick. Deer ticks are active in Vermont mainly from March through December, though they have been found on dogs year round, especially in warmer winters. Lyme causes illness in about 10-20% of dogs who are infected, most commonly causing a syndrome of fever, joint pain and lethargy. These signs can develop a few weeks to a few months after exposure. It is unknown whether dogs can have flare-ups after their initial episode, or if recurring symptoms mean they are actually being reinfected. Rarely, dogs can develop kidney failure from lyme disease. This kidney failure is usually fatal despite treatment. Little is known about this form of lyme disease and there is currently no way to predict which lyme-positive dogs will acquire kidney disease.

TESTING FOR LYME EXPOSURE

Veterinary lyme tests check for the presence of antibodies to a part of the bacterium called the C6 antigen, and newer tests actually measure the antibody level. This antibody level can help us distinguish between old asymptomatic infections and more active infections. High antibody levels suggest there are still lyme bacteria circulating in the body. The test may be positive as soon as 3 weeks after a tick bite and may remain positive for years. Exposure to the bacteria and developing antibodies does not protect a dog against reinfection or illness.

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR YOUR DOG

We recommend yearly testing of your dog for antibodies to lyme, anaplasma, and ehrlichia with a test called the 4DX. Even if your dog has previously been positive for lyme disease, annual testing lets us detect new exposures to these tick borne diseases as well as heartworm disease. Treatment is definitely indicated for dogs who are sick with signs compatible with lyme disease, as well as for dogs with elevated antibody levels. Dogs who have a new exposure to anaplasma or ehrlichia should have a platelet count to look for active infection (low platelets) and be treated if indicated.

THE BEST TREATMENT IS PREVENTION

Since lyme disease in its most devastating form can be fatal, the best protection is to prevent exposure (this is particularly important if your dog has already tested positive for lyme). In Vermont, ticks are active from March until December, and some can be active during our warmer winters. We recommend the oral flea and tick preventatives Credelio, Nexgard and Bravecto, or the Seresto collar as a cost effective alternative. Note that the collar needs to be changed more frequently (every 5 months) on dogs who swim. Ask our staff for recommendations if you are unsure. Vaccination against lyme disease is safe, effective, and also recommended. When the vaccine is started, it must be boosted in 2-6 weeks, then is repeated yearly.

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