



# Preparing Children and Teens for a Tough Tick Season

By KJ DELL'ANTONIA

A post last week on the Times' Green blog encouraged Northeast residents to brace for a [hungry tick season](#). Various environmental factors (specifically, fewer white-footed mice to feed on this year, leaving ticks looking for tasty mammal alternatives) mean that this spring and summer the woods will be filled with poppy-seed-size black-legged ticks in need of a meal.

And thanks to those mice, scientists expect that many of those ticks will be infected with Lyme disease — which, if left untreated, can cause chronic fatigue, joint pain and neurological problems.

This weekend, my daughter found a tick in her hair while my husband and I were out, and the creative way she and her older brother dealt with it reminded me that older children and teenagers need a basic primer on ticks to help protect themselves. Tweens and teens, in particular, are at a stage when they will want to (and should) become responsible for checking their own skin — but with the risks so high, parents need to make sure they're able to do it right. Children should know to run their hands over their necks, backs and legs, and to check any hair-covered areas thoroughly.

"Ticks must be embedded more than 24 hours to transmit Lyme disease," says Dr. Nathan Litman, chief of pediatric infectious diseases at the Children's Hospital at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx. "Teenagers should be competent at inspecting their bodies for an embedded tick." The ticks are small, but certainly visible: from the size of a sesame seed to a watermelon seed when engorged.

A parent, or, if necessary, a doctor, can remove the tick with tweezers. (Do remind your children not to panic and scrape, which can leave a tick half in and half out, and make sure to look at the site of any tick your child has removed herself.) If the tick has been embedded for more than 24 hours, Dr. Litman says, many physicians would give a single dose of doxycycline as a preventative step.

Remind your kids, too, about the basics of tick prevention:

- Wear long sleeves and pants when possible.
- Wear light colors to help make ticks more visible.
- Tuck pants into socks to limit exposed skin.
- Check after every outdoor exposure: lacrosse fields and gardens can harbor ticks as well as the deep woods.

What did my children do with their discovery? Flushed it down the toilet, which (while exactly what I would have done) meant we couldn't identify it (not all ticks can carry Lyme disease), or be sure it wasn't attached. And, for reasons I can't really explain, coated my daughter's hair with about half a cup of olive oil. Innovative, yes. Useful, not so much.

So to the list of obvious tick season precautions, I add: tell the kids to bring their ticks to you, and to save the olive oil for pasta.