



Ticks: Prevention and treatment

Ticks are blood-feeding parasites that live in long grasses and bushland. They crawl up the stems of grasses or along branches and perch with their front legs extended, ready to latch on to an animal or human that may brush past them.

Most tick bites result in minor symptoms but occasionally people can develop a severe allergic reaction.

What are ticks?

Ticks are external parasites of mammals (including humans), birds and reptiles.

There are four stages in a tick's lifecycle; egg, larva, nymph and adult. A blood meal is required for each of these stages to develop.

What do ticks look like?

There are approximately 850 known species of ticks around the world, with about 75 of these being found in Australia.

Ticks can be divided into two families:

- Hard ticks (family: *Ixodidae*) - have a hard body (dorsal plate) and elongated mouthparts with rows of backward pointing teeth.
- Soft ticks (family: *Argasidae*) - have a wrinkled leathery appearance. Only a few species of this type are found in Australia.

Tick sizes vary. The body of the adult paralysis tick is about 3-5 mm in length.

Ticks are usually pale brown in colour, but adult females may appear grey-blue in colour after feeding.

Where are ticks found?

Ticks can be found in moist, humid areas. Long grasses and bushland provide ideal environments for ticks.

Ticks are not very mobile, so they rely on passing animals for a blood meal. They crawl up the stems of grasses or along branches and perch with their front legs extended, ready to catch on to any host that may brush past them.

How do ticks affect humans?

A tick attaches itself by piercing its sharp mouthpiece into its host's skin. It then injects an anticoagulant which allows it to feed without the blood clotting in its mouthpiece.

Most tick bites result in a few minor symptoms or no symptoms. Sometimes the injected anticoagulant may cause local irritation or a mild allergic reaction. Antihistamine medication may help soothe mild reactions.

Removing ticks

Remove ticks with pointy tweezers as soon as possible.

To remove a tick:

- Use fine pointed tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible.
- With steady force, gently pull the tick out.
- Apply disinfectant to the bitten area after removal.
- If you have difficulty removing the tick or suffer any symptoms after removal, seek medical attention.

Public Health Fact Sheet

Tips

Don't use folklore remedies (such as matches or pins) - this will irritate the tick and make it harder to completely remove.

A tick's mouthpiece is barbed, not spiralled, so twisting the tick to pull it out doesn't help.

Consult your local pharmacist for more advice.

Occasionally people develop a severe allergic reaction or anaphylactic shock from a tick bite. This may cause swelling of the face or throat and lead to breathing difficulties. If this occurs seek immediate medical attention.

In some cases, ticks may pose a threat to human health. Tick-borne diseases are not widespread in South Australia and can usually be treated with antibiotics.

How to prevent tick bites?

The best way to prevent tick bites is to avoid tick-infested areas.

If this is not possible, wear appropriate clothing such as:

- a long sleeved shirt
- long pants tucked into socks
- a wide brimmed hat.
- light coloured clothing to make it easier to see ticks on clothes before they attach to the skin.

An insect repellent containing diethyl-meta-toluamide (DEET) or picaridin should be applied to clothing and skin before going into tick infested areas. The repellent should be applied and re-applied according to the manufacturer's instructions.

All clothing should be removed after visiting tick infested areas and the entire body checked for ticks. Pay particular attention to areas behind the ears and the back of the head or neck.

Remember to check your pets for ticks and consult your local Vet if you are concerned.

Further information

If you are concerned about ticks, contact:

- your Medical Practitioner
- the Poisons Information Centre: 13 11 26
- your local council Environmental Health Officer
- the Department of Health on 8226-7100 or go to our website: www.health.sa.gov.au/pehs/environmental-health-index.htm.

Contact

Applied Environmental Health
Public Health
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