

# Florida uptick in tick-borne diseases

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Florida is exceptional for countless reasons – sunshine, beaches, theme parks—but a new distinction is cause for growing concern among health experts and tourism officials alike: a rapid and unexplained increase in the number of cases of tick-borne diseases.

A problem for decades in the Northeast, Lyme disease cases in Florida are still relatively small by comparison – fewer than 100 per year. But the rate of growth of Lyme and other tick-borne diseases – as much as 150 percent in the last 10 years – has put Florida among the top 20 states for the number of cases reported annually.

Possible explanations range from the influx of infected people traveling to Florida from other areas, to problems with diagnosis, the Sunshine State's unique flora and fauna, climate change – or even newly emergent pathogenic microorganisms. However, the real answer remains elusive.

The mystery has experts scrambling.

"We've got this increase and we just don't know why," said Holly Donohoe, an assistant professor in the University of Florida's department of tourism, recreation and sport management and associate director of UF's Tourism Crisis Management Institute.

In 2010, 86 Lyme disease cases were reported in Florida representing a 140 percent increase since reporting began in 1993 while reports of other tick-borne diseases have also increased between 2000 to 2010: erlichiosis/anaplasmosis increased 75 percent (8 to 14); Q fever

increased 200 percent (0 to 2); and Rocky Mountain spotted fever increased 40 percent (10 to 14).

Compared with other states, Florida is especially vulnerable to the effects of tick-borne diseases because so much of its economy depends on tourism. On any given day, Donohoe said, there are five tourists in Florida for every state resident. What's more, outdoor, nature-based venues such as state parks are second only to theme parks as tourist destinations.

In addition, some scientists and [public health officials](#) are at odds over whether Lyme disease exists in the South and especially in Florida. That has left some patients diagnosed with Lyme disease confused and sometimes angry over what they perceive as insufficient attention and resources devoted to their plight. A Nov. 15 [article](#) in Discover magazine examines the debate in detail.

Further complicating matters, research and resources devoted to tick-borne diseases have been focused on the Northeast because that's where Lyme disease has been most prevalent. In other words, Florida is a relative newcomer when it comes to understanding the diseases that ticks may transmit.

That, Donohoe said, is why time is of the essence.

With those issues in mind, the University of Florida on Dec. 5 will host a symposium on tick-borne disease, bringing together local, state and national experts to start developing a battle plan before the problem gains a stronger foothold. Among those attending will be Dr. Paul Mead, chief of epidemiology and surveillance for the Lyme disease program with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Mead generated national headlines in August when he reported

preliminary CDC data indicating that the number of Americans infected with Lyme disease each year is around 300,000 – 10 times more than previously reported.

Also participating in the symposium is Dr. Glenn Morris, director of UF's Emerging Pathogens Institute, which is organizing the symposium along with the Tourism Crisis Management Institute.

The EPI, of which Donohoe is a member, is taking the lead on the search for answers.

"If we don't get ahead of this," Donohoe said, "tourism is at risk in addition to the state's health and economy."

Provided by University of Florida

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