

What you need to know about flea and tick bites this summer

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Adult deer tick, *Ixodes scapularis*. Credit: Scott Bauer/public domain

While flea and tick bites usually are a problem that you hear about with

dogs and cats, they are becoming a growing concern in humans as well. Baylor College of Medicine infectious diseases expert Dr. Laila Woc-Colburn tells you what you need to know this flea and tick season.

"We have been seeing an increase in flea and [tick](#) bites since last year and this will continue," said Woc-Colburn, associate professor of [infectious diseases](#) and director of medical education at the National School of Tropical Medicine at Baylor College of Medicine. "Tick season starts around April or May and usually peaks in June and July. Usually by August and September, there is a decrease in the tick population. This is reflective of the life cycle of the ticks, which hibernate over the winter and come out of hibernation in late April."

The increase in the tick population also is related to climate change and an increase in the deer population, a popular reservoir for flea- and tick-borne diseases. Flea bites also can occur in possum and raccoon populations in the area and they may harbor diseases.

Dogs and cats are usually the first ones to be affected by flea and tick bites, which indicates that the season has begun. Common places where ticks are found include grassy or wilderness areas, bayous and campsites.

Ticks can carry many types of diseases, often referred to as rickettsial diseases. Most common in Texas are spotted fever, relapsing fever and ehrlichiosis. In Texas, another common tick [disease](#) is southern tick-associated rash illness (STARI), which is caused by the bite of a lone star tick.

Fleas can cause diseases like murine typhus, a type of rickettsial infection. Last year, Harris and Travis counties in Texas saw a mini-epidemic of murine typhus, which causes fever, headache, rash, chills, loss of appetite, nausea, vomiting and achy muscles. This epidemic likely was due to an increase in the flea population.

In other parts of the country, such as Virginia and North Carolina, Rocky Mountain spotted fever is a very common tick-borne disease in the summer and can cause a rash on the palms of the hands and soles of the feet with fever, headache and abdominal pain. This has the highest mortality rates, about 25 percent, if left untreated.

Ticks also are common in Africa and the Southeast and Northern territories of Australia.

Woc-Colburn said to follow these steps when going for a hike or walk in areas where fleas and ticks can be found:

- Wear insect repellant with DEET or permethrin
- Wear high socks and long pants
- When you return, do a tick check for yourself and both a flea and tick check for pets

It's important to use flea and tick medication for pets, Woc-Colburn said, and if pets have fever or acting abnormally, see the veterinarian right away.

She also said to be sure to remove the tick appropriately. Ticks have two parts – the head and the body. If you pull the tick off with your fingers, you will pull the abdomen off, but not the head. Instead, use tweezers to grab the tick below the head and pull up, or perpendicular to the body. Once the tick is removed, look at it carefully under a magnifying glass to be sure all parts of the tick have been removed. Give pets a flea bath to remove fleas.

One important way to know if a tick has transmitted disease is from its color. Ticks do not transmit disease when they bite, but rather when they take blood. Brown ticks have not transmitted, whereas gray ticks, which are full of blood, indicate that transmission has gone from the tick to the

human or mammal.

Look for symptoms such as high [fever](#), rash and a headache that does not go away with pain relievers, Woc-Colburn said. If you experience these symptoms a few days after removing a tick, call your primary care physician. Physicians will look for low white blood cell count, low platelet count and impaired liver function tests.

Many [tick-borne diseases](#) are treatable using an antibiotic called doxycycline, but Woc-Colburn emphasized that preventing bites is key.

Provided by Baylor College of Medicine

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