

# Are You Protecting Your Workers from Lyme Disease?



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Being an owner or manager in charge of a lawn care company, there's no doubt that you are doing everything you can to make sure your employees are working in a safe environment. You hold frequent safety tailgate meetings, you provide the correct personal protective equipment, you conduct job site safety audits, you make sure the equipment they use is in good working order, etc., but are you also doing all you can to prevent your workers from getting Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is transmitted to people by ticks infected with the bacterium *Borrelia burgdorferi* and is the most common tick-borne disease in the northern hemisphere. It was first reported in the U.S. in Old Lyme, Conn., in 1975, when a number of cases of juvenile arthritis had been diagnosed and were brought to the attention of researchers. Since 1982, more than 150,000 cases of Lyme disease have been reported to the Center for Disease Control. At this point, it is known to only be transmitted to humans or other animals by the deer tick, although other tick species can be infected with the bacteria. Studies have shown that an infected tick can't transmit the bacteria until it has been attached to its host (human or other animal) for 36 to 48 hours, so it is important to do an examination once a day and remove any ticks before they are engorged or swollen. Therefore, you should strongly encourage your workers to check for ticks at the end of each day. The months of May, June and July are when the ticks that transmit Lyme disease are more active, and they prefer areas with high grass and leaf litter—just the type of areas where you and your employees work.

Symptoms of Lyme disease include a fever, headache, fatigue, depression and a red rash. According to the American Lyme Disease Foundation ([www.aldf.com](http://www.aldf.com)), the expanding rash is thought to occur in 80 percent to 90 percent of all cases, and appears as either a solid red expanding rash or blotch or a spot surrounded by clear skin with a ring around it of an expanding red rash (like

a bull's-eye). This rash usually appears within one to two weeks after disease transmission and can persist for about three to five weeks.

If treated early on, Lyme disease can usually be cured with a single dose of antibiotics. So, employees should know what to watch out for in the event they are bitten and know how to properly remove the tick. In its later stages, the disease can be treated with a full course of antibiotics, but patients will most likely have lingering symptoms, and in some rare occasions, it can cause permanent damage. And, the antibiotics can be just as harsh as the disease, and the treatment can last years. The longer the disease goes untreated, the worse the symptoms get, and advanced stages can cause long-term joint inflammation, heart rhythm problems and nervous system problems, including numbness, paralysis of the face muscles, vision problems, sleep disorders and more.

One of the best defenses is to have your company uniform include long-sleeved shirts and pants that are a light color, and have your employees spray all exposed skin and clothing with an insect repellant (with 20 percent to 30 percent DEET). Ticks will find their way to exposed skin, and especially like body creases, such as the back of the knee or the nape of the neck and the armpit, so be sure to have as much skin covered as possible with no openings that might allow ticks to get in. It might be hard to ask your workers to cover from head to toe in the heat of the summer, but you could ultimately be saving their life. Northeast and north-central states have the highest risk of exposure, but cases have been reported all over the United States, so precautions should be taken regardless of your location.

Lyme disease may not be at the top of your safety checklist, but it should be added to your safety program. Teach your workers how to protect themselves from ticks and what they need to do if they do get bit. Not all people who are bitten by a deer tick will get Lyme disease, but it's not a chance that I would want to take.



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