

Tick Bites

Brief Version

What are tick bites?

A tick is a small brown bug that attaches to the skin and sucks blood for 3 to 6 days. The bite is usually painless and doesn't itch. The wood tick, which carries Rocky Mountain spotted fever and Colorado tick fever, is up to 1/2 inch in size. The deer tick, which spreads Lyme disease, is the size of a pinhead. After feeding, both of these ticks will be swollen and easy to see.

How can I take care of my child?

Remove the tick. The simplest and quickest way to remove a wood tick is to pull it off. Use tweezers to grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible (try to get a grip on its head). Pull upward steadily until it releases its grip. Do not twist the tick or jerk it suddenly because these movements can break off the tick's head or mouth parts. Do not squeeze the tweezers to the point of crushing the tick.

If you don't have tweezers, pull the tick off in the same way using your fingers. Tiny deer ticks need to be scraped off with a knife blade or the edge of a credit card. If the body is removed but the head is left in the skin, use a sterile needle to remove the head (as you would remove a splinter).

A recent study showed that ticks do not back out when you put a hot match near them or when you cover them with petroleum jelly, fingernail polish, or rubbing alcohol.

How can I prevent tick bites?

Use an insect repellent on clothes. The best kind to use is one that has an ingredient called permethrin. Put it on clothes (especially pant cuffs), shoes, and socks. This product should be used on clothes and other outdoor items only. It does not help if put on the skin.

Anyone hiking in tick-infested areas should wear long clothing and tuck the ends of their pants in their socks. During the hike, check clothing or exposed skin for ticks every 2 to 3 hours. At the end of the day, do a bare skin check. A quick shower at the end of a hike will remove most ticks.

Call your child's doctor right away if:

- You can't remove the tick or the tick's head.
- Your child has a fever or widespread rash within 2 weeks following the bite.

Call during office hours if:

- Your child has a rash that looks like a bull's-eye near the bite.
- You have other questions or concerns.

Written by B.D. Schmitt, M.D., author of "Your Child's Health," Bantam Books.

This content is reviewed periodically and is subject to change as new health information becomes available. The information is intended to inform and educate and is not a replacement for medical evaluation, advice, diagnosis or treatment by a healthcare professional.