



Interior Health

MEDIA RELEASE

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Evidence of Lyme disease found in Okanagan

KELOWNA- Interior Health, in conjunction with the BC Center for Disease Control (BCCDC), has found the first indirect evidence of the Lyme disease bacteria in the Okanagan valley. “We have been concerned it might be present in the Okanagan at very low levels and this recent information confirms the low risk”, said Dr. Rob Parker, Medical Health Officer with Interior Health.

A Westside man had tested positive for Lyme disease in August 2005, but it could not be determined with certainty if he had been infected locally, or in travels outside of the region. The BCCDC carried out additional tick and deer mouse collection in the central Okanagan to see if they could find evidence of the Lyme disease causing spirochete, *Borrelia burgdorferi*. Three areas were surveyed: McCollough Lake, Vaseux Lake and near Bear Creek. A total of 75 deer mice and 53 ticks were collected. Of the 14 deer mice collected in one area (Vaseux Lake), one mouse was positive for Lyme antibodies, indicating it had been exposed to the *B. burgdorferi* spirochetes at some point in the past. Of the 53 ticks collected, only 3 were *Ixodes angustus* capable of transmitting Lyme disease; none of the ticks were positive for the *Borrelia burgdorferi* spirochete.

“The findings are in some ways reassuring”, stated Parker. “Most of the ticks in the interior are of a type (*Dermacentor andersoni*) not known to transmit Lyme disease. Even in areas like coastal BC where the *Ixodes* ticks are more common, surveys have found that only between 0.2-1.0% of those ticks have the Lyme disease spirochetes”.

Lyme disease can be a serious illness for anyone contracting it, so routine precautions while hiking are advisable, and early diagnosis is important as effective antibiotic treatment is available. “This new finding doesn’t change the advice we have routinely been giving the general public”, said Dr. Parker. “People should take measures to prevent tick bites wherever in BC they are hiking out of doors during the spring, summer and fall”.

This BCCDC research project is one of several in an ongoing effort to determine the areas of BC most at risk for Lyme disease. These results confirm earlier studies which show that Lyme is present in several areas of the province but that the ticks carrying the disease are still rare.

The BCCDC reports the ticks present in BC that are able to transmit Lyme disease causing pathogens are the western black-legged tick (*Ixodes pacificus*) and more rarely, *Ixodes angustus*. Recently *Ixodes auritulus*, an avian tick species also have been found to carry Lyme disease spirochetes. This study as well as others in BC over the past years shows that although *I. pacificus* and *I. angustus* can be a vector of Lyme, neither are able to transmit nearly as well as the ticks present in other parts of Canada.

Three to five cases of Lyme disease in humans are reported to public health each year in BC. The best protection from this disease is to wear appropriate clothing when walking or working in areas where ticks may be present. Particularly during the months from May to November, any one spending time outdoors in tall grass or wooded areas should take precautions to prevent tick bites. To prevent tick bites the following measures are strongly recommended:

- Walk on cleared trails;
- Wear a hat, long sleeves and pants and light colored clothing;
- Tuck pant legs into socks or boots;
- Use an insect repellent containing DEET on clothing and exposed skin.

Healthfiles with more information on Lyme disease are available at your local public health office or online at: <http://www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/hfile01.stm>

For more information, please contact:

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