Jean Reily believes she contracted Lyme disease from a tick bite she received 10 years ago in her back yard in Comite Hills subdivision, where she is seated in the photo above. State epidemiologists have reported the presence of Lyme disease in Louisiana, although the number of confirmed cases is small.

THE TICK PERIL

Lyme disease causes multitude of problems

By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON
Advocate staff writer

Gladys McCarley, 75, of Baton Rouge has Lyme disease. She was first diagnosed by a Sunday school friend who had read about the symptoms in an Ann Landers column. A bridge partner who knew a woman with symptoms of Lyme disease confirmed the diagnosis.

Subsequently, so did a local doctor and a blood test.

There were six cases of Lyme disease confirmed in Louisiana last year, two so far this year (including McCarley) and two pending, according to state epidemiologist Dr. Louise McFarland. To date, there have been 15 confirmed cases in the state.

While some of those cases were contracted by residents when they traveled out of state, most were contracted in Louisiana, McFarland said. Although it is most common in the Northeast, Lyme disease has been diagnosed in 49 states.

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection usually transmitted by a tick bite. Difficult to diagnose, it can mimic other diseases and cause serious problems involving the skin, joints, nervous system, heart and eyes.

Parish and state officials and an LSU School of Veterinary Medicine professor are investigating the possibility that McCarley contracted Lyme disease from flies she received. She does not recall any bites from ticks, but she did receive several flea bites in her yard just before her symptoms emerged in March.

And she reports that she had raccoons in her attic and neighborhood. Authorities are trying to capture a raccoon to test it for Lyme disease on the theory that the fleas that bit McCarley may have been infected by the raccoons.

Fleas have been suspected as being carriers of Lyme disease; however, there has been no scientific confirmation, said Matthew Yates of Mosquito and Rodent Control.

Attempts to capture the raccoons in the Bernard Terrace neighborhood and test them for the disease have been unsuccessful so far.

Meanwhile, McCarley is being treated with antibiotics. Her symptoms include a rash, stiff joints, weakness and mental confusion. Still, she feels blessed that her case was diagnosed early and is hopeful that treatment will be effective.

Jean Reily, 65, does not feel so lucky.

Recently diagnosed with seronegative Lyme disease (unconfirmed by blood test) by an infectious disease doctor, Reily thinks she was bitten by a tick in her yard in Comite Hills subdivision nearly 10 years ago.

She remembers a telltale circular rash resembling a bull’s-eye at the site of the bite at that time. It was diagnosed as psoriasis. The rash deepened, destroying several layers of skin, and refused to heal.

Soon, Reily started having severe headaches, dizziness, then stiffness in her neck and joints. She also suffered from nerve damage, vision problems and lapses of memory.

Reily saw 14 different local doctors in 10 years, describing her symptoms to each one, yet no one suspected Lyme disease. "Nobody put the pieces of the puzzle together" during that time, she said.

An acute central nervous system flare-up last year, which left Reily mostly bedridden for six months, called for additional testing. This time, a neurologist ran a blood test for Lyme disease and, although the results came back negative (the test reportedly does have false negatives), Reily was convinced that she finally had a diagnosis. Careful research led her to the conclusion that she had

"People think Lyme disease is just in New England, but that’s just not true. We need to be wary in Louisiana. I never work in the yard without protecting myself now."

—Lyme disease sufferer Jean Reily

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Lyme disease because her symptoms matched the disease description.

Reily called the Lyme Borreliosis Foundation in Connecticut, where she was referred to an internist in Metairie who specializes in infectious diseases. He agreed with the diagnosis of seronegative Lyme disease and immediately prescribed antibiotics.

While her health has improved, Reily said she is not free of symptoms and believes she may need to stay on antibiotics indefinitely.

She is angry that her diagnosis took so long and anxious that the general public and the medical profession become better informed about Lyme disease.

"People think Lyme disease is just in New England, but that's just not true. We need to be wary in Louisiana. I never work in the yard without protecting myself now," Reily said.

Tick bite prevention measures include wearing clothes that are light colored (to spot ticks) and of tightly woven material. Shirts should be tucked into long pants, which should be tucked into socks when venturing out in grassy or woodland areas. Tick or insect repellent may be used sparingly and frequent tick checks should be made. If a tick is attached to the skin, it should be removed gently with tweezers.

Any symptoms of Lyme disease following a tick bite should be reported immediately to a physician.

Watch for a rash or red patch, especially one that expands over several days. Flu-like symptoms (fever, chills, headache) often occur in the early stage of Lyme disease, followed by symptoms similar to meningitis (difficulty in concentrating and remembering) in the middle stage and arthritis (joint pain and swelling) in the late stage. Lyme disease is treatable with antibiotics at any stage; however, it is easier to treat in the early stage.

More information about Lyme disease may be obtained from the Lyme Borreliosis Foundation, P.O. Box 462, Tolland, Conn. 06084.