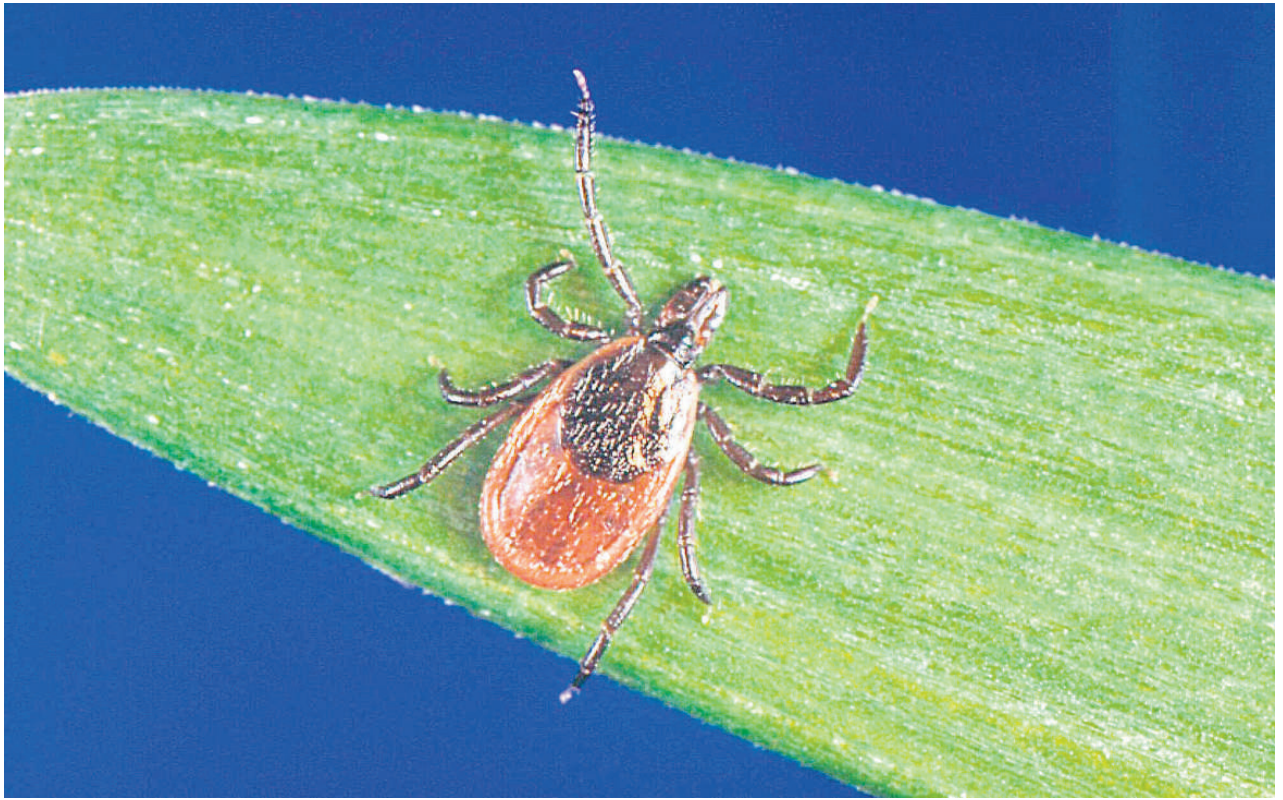
Tick-related ER visits surged during early spring in Md. region

By Karl Hille



A blacklegged tick, also known as a deer tick, a carrier of Lyme disease. **CDC VIA AP/FILE**

Tick-related emergency room visits surged during the warm early spring in Maryland and across the Northeast, experts say.

The creepy crawlers accounted for as many as 183 of every 100,000 visits in April in the Northeast, the region with the highest rates of tick-borne diseases, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported on its Tick Bite Data Tracker dashboard. Those visits represent a jump from 51 per 100,000 in March of this year and 120 per 100,000 emergency trips from April of 2022, according to the dashboard.

"Trends in Maryland are mirroring what you're seeing in the Northeast," Dr. David Crum, the Maryland Department of Health's chief public health veterinarian, told The Baltimore Sun. "No one has been able to pinpoint exactly why. It might be due to an increase in public awareness about the diseases and risks. Also, due to the early spring warmth, we've probably had a lot of tick nymphs emerge earlier this year."

Nymphs, the first life stage for the black-legged or deer ticks, can be hard to spot on your skin or clothing, the CDC warns. They can be as small as the period at the end of this sentence, and can emerge in small swarms, looking for their next meal.

Tick bites can cause a variety of diseases, transmitted when they latch on and begin feeding. Alpha-gal syndrome mostly affects adults, but it can cause a red meat allergy. Lyme disease causes fever, headache, fatigue and sometimes a characteristic bull's-eye-shaped skin rash. If left untreated, it can spread to joints, the heart and the nervous system.

The Maryland Department of Health reports there were more than 3,000 cases of Lyme disease in the state in 2024, while other diseases accounted for fewer than 100 cases.

There are no preventative medicines currently available. Some companies like Tonix Pharma and Pfizer are working on solutions, including monoclonal antibody vaccines. This new vaccine technology — used for COVID-19 vaccines — delivers antibodies directly into the blood, rather than prompting your immune system to produce them.

"The best way to prevent any tick-borne diseases is to not get bitten in the first place," Crum said. "If you're going to be enjoying the outdoors, as you should, you need to take some precautions."

Ticks are active any time the temperature rises above 40 degrees, the CDC advises. You're less likely to pick up a parasitic hitchhiker by staying on trails and keeping your pets out of the woods. But if you do venture further, prepare by spraying yourself with DEET, picaridin, or IR3535-based repellants or wear permethrin-treated clothing.

The Maryland Department of Health also recommends wearing long sleeves and long pants, choosing light-colored clothing to see ticks more easily and tucking your pants into your socks and shirt into your pants to keep ticks outside of clothing.

"Talk to your veterinarian about annual or monthly treatments that are right for your four-legged friends and your types of activity," Crum said.

You can also perform a daily tick check after you go inside and take a shower. Throwing your outdoor clothing into the dryer for a hot 10 to 15-minute tumble can kill any nymphs that still haven't found some bare skin to bite.

Have a news tip? Contact Karl Hille at 443-900-7891 or khille@baltsun.com.