

Staying safe from Lyme disease

By Andrew Domino

Summer in Kalamazoo is the perfect time to get out and enjoy the weather, on the lake shore, in campgrounds or even in your own backyard. But a beach towel and hiking boots aren't the only thing you need to keep with you in the outdoors.

"We wear bug spray and long clothes in our backyard," said Giovanna Sabatini-Key, 33, of Portage. She is living with Lyme disease, a condition that often starts with a large rash and fatigue, and can develop into severe pain and dizziness. The disease is spread by tiny ticks that burrow into the skin. They often hide in high grass and are carried by animals from mice to deer.

The Centers for Disease Control report 114 confirmed cases of Lyme disease in Michigan in 2012, the latest year they reported data. It's a 34 percent increase over the previous year. Though most cases nationwide are in New England and the area from Chicago to Minneapolis, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services classifies counties near the Lake Michigan coast, including Kalamazoo County, and parts of the Upper Peninsula as places with "known risk for Lyme disease."

Pesticides can keep the ticks at bay, but knowledge is just as important, says Linda Lobes, head of the Michigan Lyme Disease Association. She gets about 500 calls a month from around the state, and 75 percent of the callers have already been bitten. A lot of callers get the same answer: carefully remove the entire tick using tweezers, and head to the doctor for testing.

"If you're treated early (in the first 30 days), your chances of getting Lyme disease go down," she said.



Sabatini-Key is co-chair of the MLDA's Kalamazoo group. Right now, they're searching for a place to hold monthly meetings for Lyme disease victims and loved ones. She's also made it her mission to spread the word about the disease.

"It took me eight doctors and two years before I was properly diagnosed," Sabatini-Key said. "One of the misconceptions is that Portage and Kalamazoo don't have it yet. There's not a lot of doctors who have the proper education."

When she and her family go outside — even to their backyard — they use insect spray with the chemical DEET. After everyone is back indoors, it's time for a thorough tick check: hair, ears, pets. The Centers for Disease Control suggest using mirrors to search every part of your body you can. Lobes recommends putting the clothes that were worn outside into the dryer for a 15-minute hot cycle to kill any ticks you didn't see. Then wash the clothes.

The ticks aren't especially tough, and they can't move far without riding on bigger animals like chipmunks (or humans). Lobes said there are ticks on the land near her home, but they stay in one-fourth of her property, so she's safe from a bite as long as she stays away from that area. CDC guidelines also suggest clearing away dead leaves and brush piles, and letting more sunlight into dark, damp areas, to reduce tick habitat.

The most significant sign of Lyme disease is a rash up to 12 inches wide, with a red outer edge and a lighter-colored middle area, making it look like a bullseye. Only about half the people with Lyme disease show that rash, Sabatini-Key said. It's accompanied by a general sick feeling. The more severe symptoms come later. Sabatini-Key also had anxiety and suffered from tremors until she was diagnosed, though that lessened after treatment. Antibiotic drugs help reduce the symptoms, and people can recover from Lyme disease — but if it's not caught early enough, the pain may linger for years.

Lobes and Sabatini-Key say they still enjoy going outside, despite living with the disease. They just want people to be careful.

"It's simple things — be aware of your surroundings," Lobes said. "Not every tick you encounter is going to have Lyme disease."

The MLDA offers free information packets on Lyme disease. Their website is <http://mlda.org>.



After talking with Lyme Disease experts for this story, Andrew Domino is going to be more careful in the woods this summer -- but he'll still be headed outdoors. You can find more of his writing at www.dominowriting.com.