

WELLBEING

Tick Tock

Lyme disease hit the headlines recently, when several celebrities told how they had been affected by it. With experts predicting a rise in UK cases of this bacterial infection, we reveal the signs to look out for



Model Bella Hadid has spoken of the "dark times" she had while laid low by Lyme disease

It's likely that many people in the UK had never heard of Lyme disease until last year, when a number of celebrities put it on the health radar.

Yolanda Foster, star of *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* and mother of models Gigi and Bella Hadid, was diagnosed with the disease in 2012 and has shared her ongoing struggle with fans of the reality TV show. Last September fellow sufferer Avril Lavigne launched a campaign to help young people diagnosed with Lyme disease, revealing how it had left her lethargic and bedridden for five months before finally getting a diagnosis. "I couldn't talk and I couldn't move. I thought I was dying," the pop star said.

Alec Baldwin, former US President George W Bush, Ben Stiller, Ashley Olsen and Richard Gere have all been diagnosed with Lyme disease in the past and Yolanda recently shared the news that her daughter Bella and son Anwar have contracted it too. So just what is Lyme disease?

Named after the US town where it was first described, Lyme disease is a bacterial infection spread by ticks infected with the *Borrelia burgdorferi* bacterium. The ticks can be found throughout the UK and in other parts of Europe, as well as in North America.

In Britain, the incidence of Lyme disease has quadrupled in the past 12 years, perhaps due to milder, damper winters, which help to prolong the tick's life. The most recent figures show that there were 1,100 reported cases in England and Wales in 2013. However, Lyme disease often goes unreported and it is estimated that the total number of cases each year is about 3,000.

Most of those affected are forestry and other outdoor workers, but a proportion of cases are among people who have visited countryside areas where ticks are common. Up to a fifth catch the disease while abroad, in particular in the USA, France, Germany, Austria, Scandinavia and eastern and central Europe. Of the infections acquired in the UK, more than half are known to have been caught in the southern counties of England, with other hot spots located in centres of outdoor activity such as the Lake District, the North York Moors and the Scottish Highlands.

WARNING SIGNS

With only a small proportion of ticks thought to be carrying the bacteria that leads to Lyme disease, you do not need to panic if you are bitten – but you do need to be vigilant. The main thing to look out for is a bullseye-shaped rash around the tick bite, which occurs in more than 75 per cent of cases of infection. Some people may also develop flu-like symptoms. If picked up at this early stage, a course of antibiotics will prevent the disease from developing. However, if the disease remains undiagnosed it can be



Yolanda Foster was diagnosed with Lyme disease in 2012

harder to treat effectively. Once bacteria have passed from the infected tick into your skin, they then multiply and travel in the bloodstream to other parts of the body. Symptoms can include tiredness, general aches and pains, headache, fever, chills and neck stiffness. These are often mild and may disappear without treatment. However, in some untreated cases the disease progresses to stage two, where symptoms are more severe and can include joint pain and even brain inflammation and heart problems. In extreme cases some experts believe you can develop long-term symptoms similar to those of chronic fatigue syndrome, which can persist even if there are no discernible levels of the original bacterial infection left.

If you live in, or are visiting, an area where ticks are common, follow this advice:

- Keep arms and legs covered and check for ticks – particularly around children’s hairlines.
- If any are found, remove as soon as possible with a special tick removal tool – this hooks underneath the tick and does not risk squashing it. In an emergency a thread of cotton can be wound close to the skin and pulled upwards.
- Do not pull the tick out with your fingers, burn it off or cover it with chemicals/creams.
- After removal, disinfect the bite area using antiseptic cream and see your GP promptly if a rash appears or you feel unwell. ❏

• For more information visit lymediseaseaction.org.uk



Singer Avril Lavigne was bedridden for five months after developing the disease

HEALTH NOTES



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