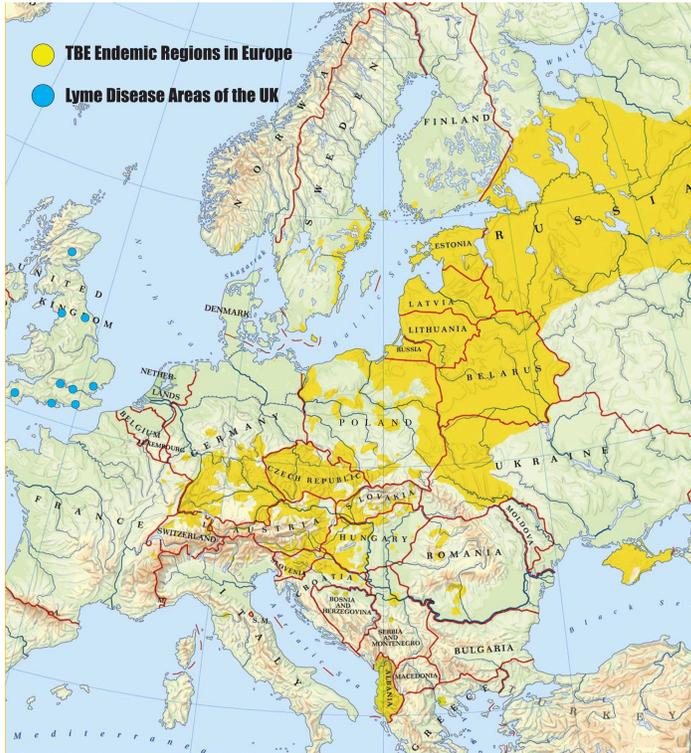


Be Aware of Ticks

Orienteers are among a key group of outdoor sports enthusiasts that risk contracting a tick-borne disease due to the amount of time they spend in rural areas both here and abroad. Ticks can survive up to 1,500 metres above sea level and the terrain for orienteering – hills, moorland and woodland – is a primary habitat. They are second only to mosquitoes for carrying disease to humans and changes in farming practices and global warming mean there are more ticks in the countryside in many parts of the UK and Europe.



The tick season starts in March and ends in November. Ticks live in the soil and emerge to climb tall grass, shrubs, bushes and low level tree branches up to a height of 20cm-70cm in search of a blood host. They attach when people or animals brush past and look for an area of soft skin to insert their feeding organ and suck blood, which is when disease is transmitted.

Ticks can attach themselves almost anywhere on the body, but prefer creases like the armpit, groin and back of the knee. Victims do not feel the bite because the tick also injects a toxin that anaesthetises the bite area.

The primary illnesses to be aware of are Lyme disease in the UK and Tick Borne Encephalitis (TBE), which is potentially fatal and currently endemic in 27 countries in mainland Europe, an increase of 11 on 2006. These include many established and new destinations for outdoor activities and adventure sports.

The world's experts on TBE say there are over 10,000 cases in endemic countries every year. Here in the UK, the Health Protection Agency is warning of an increased risk from ticks during spring and summer, having confirmed that the number of reported Lyme disease cases rose from 292 in 2003 to 684 in 2006. Some estimates put the level of Lyme disease cases in the UK as high as 2,000.



Research by Tick Alert reveals that 50 per cent of outdoor enthusiasts plan to visit at least one destination in 2007 where TBE is endemic. But while 78 per cent had heard of the disease only 1 in 5 sought protection on previous travels and two-thirds didn't know they needed to take precautions.

Professor Michael Kunze, of the Medical University Vienna, Austria and a leading expert in the prevention of TBE, said: "Every contact with grass or bushes in these countries is potentially dangerous. Travellers from non-endemic countries such as the UK are hardly aware of the potential risks of TBE when journeying into an endemic country."



Wendy Fox, chair of tick disease charity BADA-UK said: "Because tick-borne diseases can produce a bewildering variety of signs and symptoms, they are difficult to diagnose. Ticks can be as small as a poppy seed and difficult to see. Their bites are painless and many people are unaware that they have been bitten. This is why it is very important to take the correct precautions when visiting tick habitats. The number of cases of tick-borne disease has been rising for some years now and much more needs to be done to make people in Britain aware of them."

How to protect against tick bites

- Use an insect repellent that is effective against ticks
- Avoid wearing shorts in rural and wooded areas, tuck trousers into socks, or cover all exposed skin with protective clothing (though not always practical in summer)

- Inspect your skin for ticks and remove as soon as possible with fine-tipped tweezers
- Avoid unpasteurised milk which may also be infected with the TBE virus in endemic regions

How to remove a tick

Grasp the tick firmly and as close to your skin as possible. In a steady motion, pull the tick's body away directly outwards without jerking or twisting.

DIY tick check

1. Check clothing for ticks on a frequent basis.
2. Check all of your body for ticks. It may be helpful to have someone else inspect your back or other areas which are difficult to see. Be sure to include:
 - Parts that bend (back of knee, between fingers and toes, underarms).
 - Pressure points where clothing presses against skin (underwear elastic, belts, neck).
 - Other common areas (belly button, around or in the ear, hairline, top of head).
 - If you are by yourself, use a mirror.

Where can you get immunised?

To date, there has never been a case of Tick Borne Encephalitis in Great Britain so the vaccination is currently not available on the NHS. You either go to your local GP or visit a travel clinic eg Masta Travel Clinics (who work with Tick Alert). Costs will vary - but should be no more than £50-£65 per injection. Masta Travel Clinic charge £63 per injection (Feb 07).

How many vaccinations do I need?

The vaccination regime consists of a minimum course of two injections: the second injection; one to three months after the first, will give effective cover for a period of one year. A third injection 9-12 months after the first will give effective cover for 3-5 years, and a booster every three years thereafter, if needed, will continue the cover.

For further information about ticks and vaccinations visit www.masta-travel-health.com/tickalert.