This Tick-borne Virus Can Be Transmitted Within Minutes

There is currently no vaccine or treatment for the rare and often lethal condition.

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A tick-borne virus that enters the human body within minutes after a person is bitten by an infected tick has no vaccine or treatment. So far, five people in New Jersey, New York and Maine were infected with Powassan virus this summer, with two deaths reported, according to LoHud, a USA Today website.

Powassan is said to be carried by the same tick species—the black-legged tick or deer tick (Ixodes scapularis)—that carries Lyme disease and other disease-causing viruses. In addition, although it infrequently bites humans, the groundhog tick (Ixodes cookei) also carries the virus.

Powassan symptoms include fever, headache, nausea, muscle aches and weakness. But a person with the virus can feel healthy after the initial onset and experience a remission of up to 10 days, before relapsing as soon as the virus enters the nervous system. This can lead to swelling of the brain or the tissues covering the brain.

A majority of people with Powassan are hospitalized. Nearly 10% of those with the virus die. Often, those who survive suffer from permanent damage that may include partial paralysis or difficulty speaking. From 2015 to 2018, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) identified 81 cases of the virus. In 2019, 12 cases of neuroinvasive Powassan virus, the most severe form of the disease, were reported to CDC. Two of those cases resulted in deaths.

To stay safe, experts recommend wearing tick protection. Not only does this precaution protect against Powassan virus, but it also guards against the more common tick-borne virus Lyme disease. (An estimated 30,000 cases of Lyme disease are reported annually in the United States, and an estimated 300,000 people currently have the virus.)

But Powassan passes more quickly from an attached tick to a human than Lyme disease. “Lyme disease takes at least 24 hours to be efficiently transmitted,” said Alvaro Toledo, PhD, an entomologist at the Rutgers Center for Vector Biology in New Jersey. “But Powassan virus can be transmitted in minutes.”

Because so few cases are reported annually, companies haven’t invested in developing a vaccine

or specific treatments for Powassan, according to experts.

Researchers are still studying Powassan to learn more about the virus. But at this time, the best advice experts can offer is to wear tick protection in gardens, backyards, fields or wooded areas.

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