Disease carrying ticks less common up north

By Sarah Sobanski

?Awareness is a powerful tool for getting people to take action against any problem. That's true for ticks and Lyme disease too,? says Haliburton Kawartha Pine Ridge District Health Unit communications officer Bill Eekhof.

HKPR public health and Hastings Prince Edward Public Health spoke with *Bancroft This Week* to help get the North Hastings and its neighbouring public up to date on the area's tick situation.

Around a dozen ticks have been submitted for Lyme disease testing from Haliburton County this year. That's slightly up from last year's numbers.

?Last year, there were a total of 2,041 blacklegged ticks from all across the province submitted to Public Health Ontario for testing,? said Eekhof, noting in 2015 there were 1,903. ?True, the dozen or so ticks submitted from Haliburton County residents this year seem like a drop in the bucket to the overall provincial number, but we're sure the number of submissions locally will increase before the end of the year.?

The results for the ticks have yet to return.

HPEPH has submitted three ticks. The average number of ticks submitted from year to year hovers at four for public health. So far, one tick has returned. It tested negative for Borrelia burgdorferi ? the causative agent for Lyme disease.

The last time a person tested positive from a tick bite in Bancroft was in 2015, said HPEPH health inspector Aptie Sookoo. The area was flag tested following the report but no ticks were captured and public health wasn't able to verify the report.

Ixoedes cookei ticks are more common than blacklegged in the North Hastings area, he said.

?In 2016, four ticks were submitted and one was a blacklegged. The remaining three were Ixodes cookei. Ixoedes cookei prefers to live on groundhogs.?

These findings suggest dangerous ticks are more prevalent in the south of the regions.

?Public Health Ontario reports that the parts of Ontario where the most blacklegged ticks were submitted for testing in 2016 were from the City of Ottawa, Haldimand-Norfolk and Hastings and Prince Edward counties. This is really no surprise, as these regions are considered high-risk areas for Lyme disease in Ontario,? said Eekhof.

Debbie Johnston, manager of environmental health with the HKPR public health explained blacklegged ticks ? or deer ticks ? are the variety that can carry the bacteria that causes Lyme disease.

?While blacklegged ticks are known to live along the north shore of Lake Ontario and the St. Lawrence River, the reality is that people can encounter an infected blacklegged tick anywhere in Ontario. That makes it important to avoid infected blacklegged ticks anytime people are outdoors to reduce the risk of Lyme disease.?

She added, ?Blacklegged ticks act as hitchhikers, settling on tall grasses and bushes until they can attach to a passing person or animal. Once attached, ticks will feed on the host's blood. If the blacklegged tick is infected with the bacteria that causes Lyme disease, it can pass the disease onto a person ? especially if the tick has fed for more than 24 hours. If a person has been bitten by a tick, it is important to properly and completely remove the tick as soon as possible. In these situations, the health unit also advises people to seek immediate medical attention. While Lyme disease can be serious, if detected early it can be successfully treated with antibiotics.?

The health unit has seen a greater awareness and interest in ticks and Lyme disease in 2017.

?The fact that more people in this area are asking questions, picking up resources and learning ways to protect themselves from ticks and Lyme is great news because it shows they are serious about trying to reduce the risk and spread of disease,? said Eekhof.

The best way to protect against ticks is to cover up ? with long sleeves and pants and insect repellent ? if you're planning a hike along trails or through tall grass. Light coloured clothing is best, it makes it easy to spot ticks.

The health unit recommends checking for ticks after being outside ? pay special attention to the groin, scalp and armpits.

If you find a tick, remove it quickly. Use tweezers to grasp the tick close to the skin and pull straight out. Make sure to clean the area after removing the tick. If possible, put the tick into a screw-top bottle and take it to a health care provider or health unit so it can be tested.

Be sure to help protect your pets from ticks too. Check them from time to time and ensure they have a tick or flea collar.