

Loudoun's Lyme epidemic

By Hannah Hager

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Take some ibuprofen and don't worry about it.

That's what the doctor told Leesburg resident Richard Busch, 67, when he complained of muscle aches and pains four years ago. But within a few weeks of the visit, he became disoriented and incoherent. His wife thought he had suffered a mild stroke.

After he was admitted to the hospital, Busch's symptoms escalated into full-scale hallucinations – at one point he believed the hospital walls were covered with hieroglyphics, and the sink, toilet and floor in the bathroom were covered with eyelashes.

"If I had had all of my senses," he said, "I might have been more scared than I was."

During his weeklong stay, he was examined by a legion of doctors before being diagnosed through a spinal tap with Lyme disease.

Lyme disease is a bacterial infection transmitted by the bite of an infected deer tick. Symptoms range from skin rash to fatigue to neurological problems. The disease is named after the towns of Lyme and Old Lyme, Conn., where it was first recognized.

Busch's experience may not be so rare around these parts. Loudoun has nearly half the cases of Lyme disease reported in Virginia, said Loudoun's health director, Dr. David Goodfriend. In 2008, more than 500 cases of Lyme disease were reported. That's up from 29 cases in 2002.

Lyme disease sufferer Kelley Hausfeld, 17, of Lovettsville, has had some scares of her own. She once woke up on the bathroom floor in the middle of the night wondering how she got there. This disorientation, she thinks, was caused by Lyme.

Kelley and her mother, Karen, 46, believe they were infected when they lived in Ashburn 10 years ago.

Kelley also suffers from fatigue, joint swelling and weight gain. Karen has suffered a litany of symptoms she attributes to Lyme -- kidney stones, gall bladder sludge, seizures, an infection in her brain stem, migraines, fatigue and a blood clot that required open heart surgery.

Since she was infected, Karen said, she was misdiagnosed with fibromyalgia and multiple sclerosis, among other illnesses. She said one reason the disease is so difficult to diagnose is that the standard blood test searches for only one substrand of Lyme,

although more than 200 strands exist. Karen persisted and was diagnosed with Lyme disease in 2005 after a more thorough blood test. Kelley was diagnosed a year later.

Farther south in the county, Char Healy said she was bitten while doing yard work around her Purcellville property in 1997. She, too, said she was misdiagnosed with everything from chronic fatigue syndrome to generalized anxiety disorder. She was finally diagnosed with Lyme disease and the co-infection babesiosis in 2004. The co-infections babesiosis and bartonella are often found in the Lyme-infected tick's saliva.

Both Busch and Healy were eventually treated through intravenous antibiotics. If the disease had been caught at earlier stages, they could have been treated with the most common antibiotics used for Lyme such as doxycycline and amoxicillin.

In these four cases, the sufferers did not see an infected tick on their skin, and none had the telltale bull's-eye rash. Often, a tick in the premature nymph phase is the carrier, Goodfriend said. Nymphs are barely visible and no bigger than the period at the end of this sentence.

Chronic Lyme disease has become a hot topic among locals. Research on whether Lyme disease can become a chronic condition is still ongoing. Busch believes people suffering from Lyme can become convinced they have chronic Lyme when actually they have been re-bitten.

"There's this misconception that once you have Lyme disease you always have it," Busch said.

Karen Hausfeld calls her Lovettsville property a "hotbed" and knows she has been re-bitten. She also believes she suffers from chronic Lyme disease. "I look at the world through Lyme-colored glasses," she said.

Healy said, "There are many physicians still in our region who have not learned that tick-borne illness can be a multisystemic, multibacterial, chronic condition."

Healy and Hausfeld are both members of the Western Loudoun Lyme Support group, which has seen an increase in membership from five members in 2005 to nearly 50.

While Busch and Healy have recovered, the Hausfelds -- along with, they say, three other family members -- are still fighting the disease.

"One of the things that we have accepted as patients is that we are lab rats," Karen said. They have gone nearly bankrupt paying for doctors appointments and medication totaling \$2,300 monthly.

"It's kind of discredited us in the medical community," Karen said. "But when you are so desperate to get your life back to the way it was, you'll try anything."

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