

Provided by Mark H. Beers, M.D.

Health Information for Fire Island Pines

The doctors serving the Pines Community are available to help you with your healthcare needs. Nonetheless, you should know about the infectious diseases that are prevalent in our community as well as non-infectious health issues that are common in The Pines. If you seek care outside of The Pines for an undiagnosed condition, tell your doctor that you have spent time vacationing in The Pines.

Please remember that the doctors serving The Pines are not paid, except through what they charge you to deliver care. Please be considerate of their time but call them when you are concerned.

INFECTIOUS DISEASES OCCURRING IN THE BARRIER ISLANDS OF LONG ISLAND

Lyme Disease

Lyme Disease is caused by bacteria carried by the deer tick. Deer ticks are common in The Pines; they live not just on the deer but in the underbrush of most gardens and other green areas. The ticks are the size of a freckle and difficult to see, and their bites are painless. If you have been in the woods, check your body carefully for ticks.

About 75% of people who get infected develop a rash at the site of the bite between 3 days and one month after the bite. Most people then develop flu-like symptoms with muscle aches, fevers, chills, and headaches. If untreated, about 15% of people develop unusual nervous system symptoms several months later, including tingling, paralysis, and weakness. If untreated, more than half of people develop arthritis months later.

Lyme Disease is not easy to diagnose, and often treatment is given if Lyme is suspected as the cause of symptoms. Treatment requires antibiotics, which should be started as early as possible.

To learn more see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch174/ch174d.html#sec14-ch174-ch174d-967>

or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch190/ch190l.html#sec17-ch190-ch190l-202>

Babesiosis

Babesiosis is caused by a parasite carried by the deer tick. Deer ticks are common in The Pines; they live not just on the deer but in the underbrush of most gardens and other green areas. The ticks are the size of a freckle and difficult to see, and their bites are painless. If you have been in the woods, check your body carefully for ticks.

The parasite that causes babesiosis gets into red blood cells and destroys them. The infection causes symptoms that seem exactly like malaria with spiking fevers and chills, general fatigue, and anemia. In fact, Babesiosis is sometimes called *The Malaria of The North East*. In most people, symptoms are mild and the infection resolves without treatment. However, in people with AIDS, those who do not have a spleen, and in people with a genetic disposition, the infection can be very serious and even fatal. When severe, it causes high fever, severe anemia, difficulty breathing, and collapse.

The diagnosis is made by examining the blood with special stains, but a doctor has to suspect babesiosis to order this test. Treatment requires two medications taken by mouth.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch186/ch186c.html#sec14-ch186-ch186c-2104>

Rickettsioses

There are several types of rickettsiosis, all caused by tiny bacteria carried by the deer tick. Some occur world-wide and a few are common mostly on the eastern seaboard. Deer ticks are common in The Pines; they live not just on the deer but in the underbrush of most gardens and other green areas. The ticks are the size of a freckle and difficult to see, and their bites are painless. If you have been in the woods, check your body carefully for ticks.

The Rickettsioses common in The Pines cause fever, general weakness, headache, and red eyes, starting about 5-7 days after the tick bite. An ulcer

may occur at the site of the bite and a rash may develop. The condition is not easy to diagnosis with certainty, so doctors generally just start antibiotics if they suspect rickettsiosis.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch177/ch177b.html#sec14-ch177-ch177b-1107>

or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch195/ch195a.html>

Leptosporosis

Leptosporosis is caused by bacterium spread to humans through the urine of animals. Between 2 and 30 days after contact, headache, severe muscular aches, chills, and fever develop. Fever may come and go, and some people then develop red eyes and even meningitis with severe headache, confusion, and other neurological symptoms.

The diagnosis is not easy to make, and so doctors must be aware that leptosporosis is a possibility. Treatment is with antibiotics.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch174/ch174c.html#sec14-ch174-ch174c-953>

or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch190/ch190j.html#sec17-ch190-ch190j-180>

Infectious Diseases Common in Our Community

A large number of infectious diseases are spread through sexual contact and are known as sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Proper use of condoms remains the best way to prevent most STDs. For more information on STDs and safer sexual practices see

The Merck Manual at

<http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch194/ch194a.html> and <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch192/ch192a.html#CACBDAIF>

The Merck Manual – Home Edition at

<http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch200/ch200a.html>

The Gay Men's Health Crisis web site at <http://www.gmhc.org/>

The Centers for Disease Control web site at
http://www.cdc.gov/nchstp/dstd/disease_info.htm

Among the STDs occurring in the gay population, HIV/AIDS, syphilis, and gonorrhea are the most common.

HIV/AIDS

A full discussion of HIV/AIDS is beyond the scope of this web site. To learn more, information is available at many web sites. Two of the many good sources of general information can be found at *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch192/ch192a.html> and *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at

<http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch199/ch199a.html#sec17-ch199-ch199a-929>

Information about clinical trials can be found at <http://clinicaltrials.gov>

Many in our community practice safer sex. However, even one careless encounter or the breakage of a condom can expose a person to the HIV virus. If that happens to you, see a doctor immediately. If you are in The Pines, call the doctor on call for advice: do not wait until you get home. Antiviral drugs given within two days of exposure can greatly decrease the chance of becoming infected. Do not wait!

Another aspect of HIV infection that people visiting The Pines should be aware of is Acute AIDS Syndrome or Acute Retroviral Syndrome. This syndrome occurs within one to four weeks of exposure to the virus. It causes fevers, joint pain, fatigue, and swollen glands. Anyone who experiences such symptoms after unprotected sex should consult a doctor as soon as possible.

Syphilis

Syphilis is caused by an unusual type of bacteria called a spirochete that is passed during intimate contact of mucous membranes, such as the thin skin of the penis, anus, or lips. It is highly contagious. It produces an ulcer known as a chancre. The chancre goes away without treatment, but the infection does not. Over time, the infection can damage many organs in the body.

The chancre of syphilis is easy to recognize, and the infection can be diagnosed with a blood test. Treatment requires antibiotics.

To learn more and see pictures of a chancre, see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch194/ch194i.html#sec14-ch194-ch194i-2927>
or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch200/ch200b.html#sec17-ch200-ch200b-987>

Gonorrhea

Gonorrhea is caused by a bacteria that can be spread to or from the urethra, anus, or throat. It can cause burning upon urination or a pus-like drip from the penis, anal discharge or pain, or soar throat. In women, it can cause vaginal discomfort and discharge. If semen gets into an eye, it can cause an infection with redness and pussy discharge.

If the infection is not treated, it can cause serious damage locally or spread to joints, causing arthritis with redness, pain, and swelling. In women, it can cause pelvic inflammatory disease leading to pain and even sterility.

Gonorrhea is easily diagnosed by taking a swab of the urethra, vagina, anus, or throat. Sometimes the bacteria can be seen under the microscope, and it is easy to grow in the lab, a test that takes 1-2 days. Until test results are ready, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish infection with gonorrhea from infection with other bacteria (non-gonococcal infections). Treatment is with antibiotics.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch194/ch194e.html#sec14-ch194-ch194e-2878>
or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch200/ch200c.html#sec17-ch200-ch200c-1013>

Genital warts

Genital warts (also called Condylomata Acuminata or Venereal Warts) are caused by the HPV virus. The virus is spread through sexual contact. They appear as small growths on the anus, penis, vagina that often itch or bleed.

The diagnosis can usually be made simply by visual inspection. Multiple treatments are often necessary, and several therapies are available. All of the treatments cause local discomfort.

To learn more and see pictures, see *The Merck Manual*

<http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch194/ch194d.html#sec14-ch194-ch194d-2868>

or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at

<http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch200/ch200i.html#sec17-ch200-ch200i-1070>

MRSA skin infections

Staph is a common bacteria that often infects the skin. Some strains of staph have become resistant to treatment with antibiotics and are known as multiply resistant staph aureus (MRSA). All forms of staph are easy to spread through skin to skin contact but most of the time they do not cause infection. MRSA is becoming common in many communities, including the gay community.

Staph usually causes boils or abscesses. There is no way to tell a common staph infection from a MRSA infection without culturing the bacteria. However, any skin infection that does not respond to typical antibiotics may be MRSA.

To help prevent infection with MRSA, wash thoroughly with an antiseptic soap after close contact with others, especially when sweating. Cover all open wounds with protective dressings.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual* at

<http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec14/ch171/ch171c.html?qt=mrsa&alt=s>

Or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at

<http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec17/ch190/ch190r.html>

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual* at

<http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec10/ch119/ch119e.html#sec10-ch119-ch119f-660>

The Perils of the Sun and Water

The beach, swimming pools, hot tubs, and sunshine are among the great pleasures of The Pines. Yet, there are still a few health issues to be aware of when enjoying these pleasures.

Sun and Heat Injury

You have been told – sun tanning is not good for you. Sun exposure leads to skin cancer and ages the skin. If you are going to be in the sun, use a good quality sun screen. The higher the SPF rating, the greater the protection. All sunscreens must be reapplied every three to four hours because they decompose with sun exposure and wash off.

If you get too much sun, your skin will become sore and even blister. Lotions containing a mild anesthetic may help temporarily. Severe blistering may require medical treatment. Some medications make your skin more sensitive to sunshine. You should know if you are using any of these.

Even without direct sun exposure, the body can overheat. Sweating helps keep us cool but can lead to dehydration without adequate rehydration. Recreational drugs of almost any kind can impair the body's ability to stay cool and to recognize the early signs of dehydration and overheating.

Heat related illness occurs in stages. At first, a person simply feels warm, light-headed, weak, and sometimes nauseated. Muscle cramps are common. That is a strong signal to drink lots of cool water, stop exercising, and get someplace cool. In the next stage, sweating may cease, a person becomes dizzy and confused, and collapse may occur. At this point, things are already serious. A person must move to someplace cool and get adequate hydration, sometimes by IV. If left untreated, a person can go into shock with loss of blood pressure, heart strain, and even death. If you are not sure whether you are experiencing heat related illness, err on the side of caution and get help immediately.

To learn more about heat related illness see *The Merck Manual* at <http://www.merck.com/mmpe/sec21/ch318/ch318a.html> or *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec24/ch290/ch290a.html>

Hot tub folliculitis

Hot tubs can become a breeding ground for bacteria if not adequately treated with bromine or chlorine. They are particularly susceptible to overgrowth with pseudomonas, a bacteria that can infect the skin. Bathing in a contaminated tub can result in tiny blisters that sting and ooze. Treatment is with antibiotics.

Swimmer's ear

Even the cleanest swimming pool harbors lots of bacteria and fungi. Pool water often accumulates in the outer canal of the ear allowing those organisms to cause a low grade infection. Because the ear is very sensitive, even this mild infection can cause pain. The pain is particularly noticeable when you move or touch the ear.

Swimmer's ear can usually be prevented by rinsing the ears with a few drops of a mixture of alcohol and vinegar, which can also be bought pre-mixed. Often, the infection goes away by itself but it may need to be treated with prescription ear drops that contain a combination of antibiotic, antifungal, and topical steroid.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at <http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec19/ch219/ch219c.html#sec19-ch219-ch219c-82>

Poison Ivy and Other Poisonous Plants

Poison Ivy is everywhere in The Pines. Other plants that can cause rashes include poison oak and poison sumac. Most people develop only redness, itching, mild pain, and a little blistering from contact with these plants but repeated and extensive contact or individual sensitivity can lead to severe reactions that require medical attention.

The oils of these plants are absorbed from the skin but may be transferred on clothing. Skin and clothes should be washed thoroughly with lots of soap after potential contact with the plant.

Treatment is with topical steroids such as those that can be bought over-the-counter along with keeping the rash clean; cool compresses and Tylenol may ease the pain. Serious rashes should be treated with stronger topical (or even oral) steroids that require a prescription.

To learn more, see *The Merck Manual – Home Edition* at
http://www.merck.com/mmhe/sec18/ch203/ch203c.html#sb203_3