

How Lyme Disease is Misdiagnosed as Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD

by Laura Pickford Ramirez

Dr. Charles Ray Jones, the world's leading pediatric specialist on Lyme Disease calls it "the second great imitator." (Syphilis is the first.) Since it can affect the entire body in a myriad of ways, it often mimics Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD), rheumatoid arthritis, autism, depression, chronic fatigue, multiple sclerosis and more. If this disease is not diagnosed properly it can become chronic and cause neuralgic, psychiatric, cardiac and arthritic problems. Left untreated, it can lead to heart block, seizure disorder and brain destruction. Although in rare cases, people have died from it, most live a life of constant suffering.

Jakey Osborne (not his real name) was a healthy, active eight year old boy, who suddenly began having attention problems in school. Says his mother, Susan, "His teacher said that he couldn't focus or remember his lessons. He didn't want to play at recess and his grades were slipping from A's to C's and D's. She recommended that I take him to a doctor and have him checked for Attention Deficit Disorder."

Susan Osborne took her son to his pediatrician, who prescribed Ritalin, but the drug did not improve Jakey's symptoms. Instead, he became more reclusive and his reading and math skills regressed. Six months later, Mrs. Osborne happened across an article on Lyme disease and remembered that about a month before her son's behavior changed, her family had gone on a camping trip. She took Jakey to a specialist, who diagnosed Lyme disease and put him on an eight week course of antibiotics. Almost immediately, his symptoms improved. Today, thanks in part to his attentive mother, Jakey Osborne is a healthy nine year old, who excels in sports and reads at a sixth grade level.

According to Dr. Jones, "ADD usually evolves by age five. If your child has been performing well in school and suddenly starts exhibiting ADD-like symptoms, you should first seek a specialist to rule out Lyme disease. If your child is already taking Ritalin and it's had no effect, the problem could be Lyme disease."

About ninety percent of the Lyme kids Dr. Jones treats have learning disabilities. Children who have Lyme disease, but not ADD, will quickly improve their ability to focus and sit still, while receiving antibiotics. If the antibiotics are stopped too soon, the symptoms will return. Since left untreated, Lyme disease can spread into the brain, heart, eyes, lungs, urinary tract, peripheral nervous system and joints, if you have any suspicions that the symptoms could be related to Lyme, have your child checked immediately.

Lyme disease is transmitted through a tick bite. But it can also be transmitted through semen, breast milk and gestational fluids. This means that a fetus can be infected by its mother. To date, Dr. Jones has successfully treated Lyme-infected pregnant women and their babies, who were born with the disease. The implications for a fetus which contracts Lyme in utero are anatomical defects of the heart and eye, fewer or more digits than normal, cataracts, learning disabilities and extreme irritability.

The difficulty with diagnosing Lyme disease is that the tests are only about sixty-five percent accurate. There are two tests: the ELISA and the Western Blot. Of the two, the Western Blot is more definitive. According to Dr. Jones about thirty percent of those with a positive Western Blot had a negative ELISA. Also available is a PCR test via a spinal tap withdrawal of synovial fluid from an affected joint. IGeneX Laboratories is the leading U.S.-based lab for helping physicians diagnose Lyme.

Although the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends a three week course of antibiotics, Dr. Jones has found that the bacteria that causes Lyme has become increasingly hardy and even when the disease is caught early, it often needs to be treated with an eight to twelve week course of antibiotics.

Lyme Disease Risks:

Children are at great risk for Lyme disease because they are lower to the ground, enjoy unrestricted outdoor play and love to pet furry animals, such as dogs, cats and hamsters that can transfer Lyme-carrying ticks to them. Sixty percent of Lyme patients are seven years old and younger.

Of course, those living in Lyme-endemic areas are at the highest risk. Although Lyme disease is found in every state and continent, those at risk in the United States are people living in the northeast, upper midwest and northwest. Lyme is slowly spreading from east to west, infecting northern California and the coastal regions of Oregon. Connecticut has the highest incidence of Lyme disease. Rhode Island and New York have the highest incidence per capita.

Lyme disease is the fastest growing vector-borne disease in the nation. In 2001, the Center for Disease Control recorded 18,000 new cases, but some experts estimate that the actual number is closer to 200,000. This is four times the number of HIV cases per year.

Lyme disease is spread by the deer tick, which carries a spirochete (a type of bacterium) that gets into the bloodstream, travels to tissues and inserts itself into cells. The spirochete is named for Lyme, Connecticut, where clusters of children first came down with arthritis-like symptoms some thirty years ago.

Lyme Disease Prevention

How can you prevent those you love from getting this disease? Dr. Jones advises that if you live in or are traveling to a Lyme-endemic area that you should spray exposed skin with biodegradable DEET tick spray. Since rodents can transfer ticks, if you have a problem with mice, use mice boxes. When children play outside, have them wear socks, shoes, pants and long-sleeved shirts. Have them tie back long hair and tuck their pants into their socks. At the end of each day, check your child all over his body for ticks. Ticks love to nestle in the body creases, like the armpit, back of knee, groin, ears, navel and nape of the neck. If a tick gets onto clothing, it will crawl until it finds a hospitable crease of skin. Keep in mind that ticks are small—the size of poppy seeds when they're in the "nymph" stage and the size of sesame seeds after they've molted into adults. If you find a tick, don't panic because only some ticks carry the disease. If the tick has not become engorged, then it probably has not started to transmit the disease. (When a tick has become engorged, it swells to ten times its size.) Generally, this happens three to four days after the tick has latched on, so if you find it early, you decrease your risk of getting the disease. To remove the tick, use a pair of unrasped, fine-point tweezers to grasp the head of the tick and pull it straight out. (Do not try to burn the tick off with a match.) Put the tick in a plastic bag for testing.

Watch the site of the tick bite for the next three days. If you notice a rash (usually, but not always a bull's eye type rash), schedule an appointment with a qualified specialist immediately. Since some people don't experience a rash, watch for other symptoms.

If you live in a Lyme-endemic area, keep your grass cut short, keep dry leaves to a minimum, stack wood on an elevated platform, keep dog dishes and the areas around bird feeders clear of feed, so as not to attract small tick-infested animals. You may also want to have your yard professionally sprayed with insecticide.

Lyme Disease Symptoms

For many people the first Lyme disease symptom is a creeping rash. Although not everyone gets the rash, it is believed to occur in about 85% of cases.

Typically, the rash will radiate out from the site of the tick bite, but sometimes, it appears on other areas of the body. It can look like a bull's-eye, or appear solid red, or blotchy. The rash may be up to six inches in diameter and usually doesn't hurt and isn't itchy.

In addition, the infected person may experience chills, fever, fatigue and joint pain. Although these symptoms are uncomfortable, the person may mistake them for the flu. Later, fatigue may worsen. Tingling or numbness may be experienced in the arms and legs with possible facial paralysis and a stiff or aching neck.

Later symptoms may include swelling of the joints, arthritis, cardiac problems, mental disorders and severe headaches.

Lyme Disease Treatment

Lyme disease is treated with antibiotics. Since the organism, which causes Lyme has become increasingly hardy over the past thirty years, the treatment time is usually eight to ten weeks. If the bacteria is not completely eliminated, the symptoms will return. When selecting a physician to treat the disease, make sure he or she knows that contrary to what the American Academy of Pediatrics advises, it takes more than a three week course of antibiotics to eradicate the disease.

Dr. Charles Ray Jones, who is the world's leading pediatric specialist on Lyme Disease, says that about 90% of his practice is comprised of patients with the disease. Although he is 73 years old and could retire, he works tirelessly because his services are so desperately needed. This kind and dedicated physician works ten hours per day, seven days per week and lives in an apartment above his office. He is currently training other doctors to diagnose and treat the disease. After learning of Dr. Jones' commitment to his patients' wellness, I concur with medical writer, Valerie Andrews, who calls him the "Albert Schweitzer of Lyme kids."