

The Army is contributing \$4.8 million toward the research because the government thinks ticks could be used in a bioterrorist plot to spread infectious diseases.

Speakers hail Lyme research

Awareness month is May

By Dan Shapley

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The number of cases of ehrlichiosis and babesiosis, both spread by the same black-legged tick that carries Lyme disease, rose steeply in Dutchess County last year.

The tiny blood-sucking arachnid already causes 1,300 documented cases of Lyme disease every year in Dutchess, on average in the past decade. Lyme disease causes a flu-like illness that can lead to severe neurological, arthritic and cardiac problems if not treated promptly and effectively with antibiotics.

And a new type of tick, the lone star tick, is making inroads in the county, promising yet another way to get ill from enjoying the outdoors in the Hudson Valley.

But there is hope, speakers said at a press conference in Poughkeepsie Wednesday that signaled an early kick-off to Lyme Disease Awareness Month in May.

A federal bill supporting research has increased support among local representatives, and scientists are already making progress toward developing a vaccine that would prevent black-legged ticks from biting.

"There is a lot of research going on to solve this problem," said Stephen Wikel, a University of Connecticut scientist who was invited to speak by the Hudson Valley Lyme Disease Association.

Tick-spit project

Wikel is working to sequence the genome of the black-legged tick. The aim is to understand how tick spit thwarts the human immune response, so that a vaccine can be developed to thwart tick spit. **The Army is contributing \$4.8 million toward the research because the government thinks ticks could be used in a bioterrorist plot to spread infectious diseases.**

In Dutchess County, documented cases of the malaria-like babesiosis were up to 31 in 2005, from eight the past two years, according to preliminary Department of Health data. Documented cases of ehrlichiosis, which is now being called anaplasmosis, were also up significantly — to 194 cases from an average of 65 the previous three years.

Commissioner of Health Dr. Michael Caldwell said concerted educational efforts have helped residents and doctors better prevent and treat tick-borne diseases.

"We're frustrated. We've done all we can, and we need that research to push us forward," Caldwell said. "Ultimately, we're going to need a vaccine that can protect us from the bite of a tick."

A federal bill, the Lyme and Tick-Borne Disease Prevention, Education and Research Act, would spend \$100 million over five years on research and education. It has support from local Democrats and Republicans, but it is unclear how much support it has across the country.

"I'm hopeful we will be able to speed up the process of finding ways that Lyme disease can be detected, treated and prevented," said Lori Patricola, the Hudson Valley representative of U.S. Rep. John Sweeney, R-Clifton Park.

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