

Suffolk Municipalities, Health Department Partner to Take on Ticks ^[1]

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Publication: Newsday



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Mar
5
2019

Suffolk County has declared war on ticks and the diseases they transmit with the establishment of a 10-municipality partnership that will work with local health department experts to expand research and combat the bloodsucking insects.

The initiative is part of a shared services partnership that will enable towns and villages to strengthen their fight against the eight-legged creatures by sharing costs and resources. State law mandates that New York counties have shared services and strategies, which can reduce costs.

Ticks and the diseases they transmit are major public health concerns that Suffolk municipalities have in common — and towns and villages now can work cooperatively on these issues to help hundreds of thousands of residents, county officials said Tuesday.

“Widespread participation in this groundbreaking cooperative project demonstrates the urgent need to arrive at effective methods to managing tick populations and combat tick-borne illness,” Suffolk County Legis. Bridget Fleming said in a statement. “The project will enhance Suffolk County’s commitment to tackling the devastating and far-reaching impacts of tick-

borne disease for Suffolk families, and will provide a regionwide model for effective action.”

The municipalities that will work with the Suffolk County Department of Health Services, as well as vector control services, are Town of Shelter Island, Town of Southampton, North Haven, Saltaire, Old Field, Northport, Head-of-the-Harbor, Belle Terre, East Hampton and Asharoken.

Suffolk is disproportionately affected by ticks, which have been expanding their range throughout the region for decades. Experts have attributed the abundance of ticks to Suffolk’s deeply wooded and brushy terrain. And because there are so many of the insects, Suffolk has the highest Lyme disease infection rate nationwide, according to data from local, state and federal public health agencies.

On average, more than 500 cases of Lyme disease are recorded among Suffolk residents annually. Lyme is a bacterial infection that can cause a range of symptoms, the first of which may be a characteristic rash that can appear within days of a tick bite. Lyme, however, is only one of nearly a half-dozen infectious diseases transmitted locally by ticks.

A newly emerging tick-related condition that has affected hundreds of residents, particularly on the East End, is an allergy to red meat. The allergy is known as alpha-gal reaction, a severe response to galactose-alpha, a sugar in tick saliva. The sugar is present because ticks have bitten mammals whose blood carries it. Most mammals other than humans naturally have galactose alpha in their blood. Humans are allergic to it. The allergy is a newly emerging medical condition caused by tick bites.

The key to tackling the tick problem, Suffolk officials said, is working with the Department of Health Services and vector control services. Local vector experts routinely collect specimens of the insects and send them to the state laboratory in Albany for further study. Collecting samples helps public experts know which types of ticks are most active in the region, and which microbes they are carrying.

“By taking collective action, we are expanding education, collection, and analysis to ensure that we have the information and resources at our disposal to deal with these illnesses head on,” Suffolk County Executive Steve Bellone said in a statement.

Lawmakers see the partnership as a major effort toward protecting public health.

“This collaborative effort is a positive step forward to combat tick-borne illnesses. By working together, we can share research and develop better ways to protect our residents,” Southampton Town Supervisor Jay Schneiderman said.

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