Repeat Lyme disease cases are not relapses, but arise from new tick bites

By ACSH Staff — November 15, 2012

Lyme’s disease is usually contracted through the bite of an infected deer tick during a summer stroll through the underbrush. It can last a week or a month, occasionally longer, causing fever, fatigue, arthritis and even neurological problems. It can be treated highly successfully with a combination of antibiotics for 3-6 weeks. Rarely, a second course of treatment is necessary.

Sometimes, however, patients with Lyme disease develop lingering problems that feel more like chronic fatigue syndrome, even after the bacteria that causes the disease has been cleared from their system. Some patients have embraced the idea that their ailments are caused by the bacteria somehow surviving undetected in their system and have found a cottage industry of quack practitioners all-too-willing to give them expensive intravenous antibiotic treatments.

But a study [1] published in this week’s New England Journal of Medicine rebuts the idea that the bacteria, Borrelia burgdorferi, stays in the system even after treatment. Researchers from University of Pennsylvania and New York Medical College found 17 patients who had suffered repeated rashes that are the first signs of Lyme disease and were able to show through genetic testing of the bacteria that all 17 patients had suffered new infections. Basically, they had been bitten by deer ticks twice, it seems. (In fact, the 17 patients had sustained about 40 or more separate infections, as they all had at least two infections, and some of the study subjects became acutely ill again three or in one instance, four separate times.)

ACSH’s Dr. Gilbert Ross says he hopes the study will put a stop to the so-called Lyme-literate medical doctors who treat patients long-term with intravenous antibiotics, which require the services of a visiting nurse. Even though there is no evidence of actual infection, Dr. Ross says, a lot of these patients still feel better it’s the placebo effect. And the more money they pay, the better they feel, it seems.