

PRESS RELEASE

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**Prevention is better than cure for zoonotic diseases**

The risk of contracting zoonotic diseases that pass from animals to humans appears to be on the increase in the UK, but encouraging countryside users to take simple precautions to protect themselves is the best response, according to research undertaken by the UK research councils’ Rural Economy and Land Use Programme.

In England and Wales, reported cases of Lyme disease, which is transmitted via tick bites, for example, rose from 268 in 2001 to 973 in 2009. By checking for ticks when they get home, walkers and picnickers can minimise the likelihood of contracting the disease. Avoiding high risk areas, wearing trousers and long-sleeved shirts can also help.

The researchers found that a systematic approach to all the UK’s common zoonotic disease risks needs to involve a wide range of people, including the individual land managers and organisations that have responsibility for areas used by the public.

Dr Chris Quine from Forest Research, who led the project, explained: “The countryside is a place most people enjoy visiting – it brings all kinds of physical and psychological benefits and it’s a place where we come to relax. It is clear that people need to know more about zoonotic diseases in order to protect themselves, but putting up signs or giving out leaflets won’t necessarily change their behaviour. That requires a much more systematic approach which includes enabling people to do the right thing – for Lyme disease, for example, that could be providing tick removal devices at tourist information centres, for E coli it might mean providing hand washing facilities.

“It also means professional staff giving a lead and demonstrating desirable behaviours, as well as engaging with groups such as hoteliers and bed and breakfast providers, to make sure they are giving consistent and accurate advice to guests.

“At the moment it isn’t clear who should take the lead – health professionals or land managers – and although both play an important role, neither group has the whole range of health and environmental expertise needed. But if there were a mechanism to enable them to form partnerships, share knowledge and then draw on that single source, it would be a useful step forward.”

Notes for editors:

1. The Rural Economy and Land Use Programme is an interdisciplinary collaboration between the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC) and the Natural Environment Research Council (NERC), with additional funding provided by the Scottish Government and Defra. See [www.relu.ac.uk](http://www.relu.ac.uk) for more information about the Relu programme.
2. For more information about zoonotic diseases see the Health Protection Agency website <http://www.hpa.org.uk/Topics/InfectiousDiseases/InfectionsAZ/Zoonoses/>
3. For more information about the research see Relu [Policy and Practice note no 27](http://www.relu.ac.uk/news/policy%20and%20practice%20notes/27%20Quine/PPN%2027%20v2.pdf) and the [project website](http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/animaldiseaserisks).
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