



## News Release

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## Spring brings outdoor activities, health hazards

**SEMBACH, Germany** – Spring is here and people are heading outdoors to enjoy the balmy weather. But such harmless activities as taking a walk through the woods or cleaning out the attic could put you at risk for some pretty serious medical issues if you're not cautious.

A walk in the woods exposes the hiker to ticks which can carry both Lyme disease and tick-borne encephalitis, while dust stirred up from that spring cleaning job can contain dried rodent droppings that can cause hantavirus in humans. In Europe, all three diseases are found in common habitats in Germany and its surrounding countries. Specifically in areas like Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria, these diseases are prevalent, but all can be prevented with some simple precautions.

Lyme disease is caused by bacteria, while tick-borne encephalitis is caused by a virus, both of which can be transmitted when the tick bites a host.

The earliest symptom of Lyme disease may include a rash that looks like a bullseye (only 50-70 percent in European strain of disease) at the site of the tick bite, and can progress to flu-like symptoms including muscle soreness, headache, fever and malaise. Early treatment with antibiotics can usually cure the disease, but left untreated it can cause persistent chronic problems and physical disability. Although considered as the reportable disease in U.S Army medicine, not all European countries enforce mandatory reporting of Lyme disease cases and therefore, exact infection rate may be difficult to determine. For example, in Germany, Lyme disease cases are only reportable in certain states.

Tick-borne encephalitis can affect the central nervous system and causes symptoms similar to Lyme disease – headache, fatigue and muscle pain. In the event the virus does affect the central nervous system, paralysis can occur and hospitalization might be required.

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## **SPRING HEALTH HAZARDS 2-2-2-2**

In the case of tick-borne diseases, the best offense is a good defense. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends minimizing areas of exposed skin by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, boots, and hats. Tucking in shirts, tucking pants into socks, and wearing closed shoes instead of sandals may reduce risk. Repellents, such as those that contain DEET, can be applied to exposed skin and clothing. Gear can be treated with permethrin for added protection.

You should also check yourself, your loved ones and your pets for ticks after a trek through the outdoors. If you have been bitten, you should remove the tick carefully as soon as you discover it by using a pair of tweezers to remove it as close to the skin as possible. Avoid squeezing the tick or removing the head while removing the tick.

An effective vaccine for tick-borne encephalitis is available, and is a series of three shots given over a period of approximately 9-12 months. The makers of the vaccine have not sought U.S. licensure, so it is not available at Military Treatment Facilities. However, TRICARE beneficiaries with at least 9 months remaining in Germany may obtain the vaccine from a host nation facility with a prescription from their Primary Care Manager. Beneficiaries in Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg with outdoor occupations or hobbies are particularly encouraged to talk to their Primary Care Manager about the vaccine.

Hantavirus is carried by rodents – the Red Bank Vole in Germany – and is usually spread through contact with their urine and excrement. In most cases, people are infected when they stir up dust in areas that are frequented by the rodents and breathe in the dried particles of those droppings.

Patients infected with the strain of Hantavirus common to Germany may suffer from the abrupt onset of fever and flu-like symptoms, followed by abdominal pain and, in some severe cases, kidney failure. In 2012 nearly 2,800 cases of hantavirus infection were reported across Germany, with the majority reported in Baden-Württemberg and Bavaria.

Preventing hantavirus begins with keeping rodents away from your home, garage or campsite. Cleaning up spilled food to avoid attracting rodents and sealing holes that could allow them into your house or garage are a good start. When you start your spring cleaning in areas that are dusty (e.g. attics, garages and basements), wet down or wet mop the area first to avoid disturbing any dust that contain dried rodent droppings and wear a filter mask to avoid breathing in any particles while cleaning.

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### **SPRING HEALTH HAZARDS 3-3-3-3**

Experts expect the rodent and tick populations may be active sooner at a higher number this year because of the mild winter conditions experience in parts of Europe.

Springtime in Europe offers opportunities to get out and see the countryside. By taking a few simple precautions, you can ensure your outdoor experiences are safe ones.