More mice may mean more Lyme disease

By Amy Harmon, New York Times

It is August, the month when a new generation of black-legged ticks that transmit Lyme and other diseases are hatching. On forest floors, suburban estates and urban parks, they are looking for their first blood meal. And very often, in the large swaths of North America and Europe where tick-borne disease is on the rise, they are feeding on the ubiquitous white-footed mice and other small mammals notorious for harboring pathogens that sicken humans.

But it doesn’t have to be that way. A new study suggests that the rise in tick-borne disease may be tied to a dearth of traditional mouse predators, whose presence might otherwise send mice scurrying into their burrows.

If mice were scarcer, larval ticks, which are always born uninfected, might feed on other mammals and bird species that do not carry germs harmful to humans. Or they could simply fail to find that first meal. Ticks need three meals to reproduce; humans are at risk of contracting diseases only from ticks that have previously fed on infected hosts.

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