

# Lyme disease and the Rachel Carson Trail Challenge: Why I wasn't going to give up

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I wasn't sure if the pain that shot through my calves, knees, quads and hips with each step around mile 20 was because those miles had been grueling up and down, muddy and wet or because I had Lyme disease.

But with 16 miles to go before sunset of this year's Rachel Carson Trail Challenge, the pain and a stupid little tick bite weren't going to stop me.

Ticks and the Lyme disease they can carry are a fact of life for hikers, hunters and anyone spending time outside in Western Pennsylvania. Butler County logged the most cases of Lyme disease in Pennsylvania last year, with 641. Westmoreland County wasn't far behind in third, with 577. Allegheny County finished the year eighth, with 403.

When the state Health Department releases its 2017 numbers next year, I'll be one of them.

I don't remember being bitten by a tick. I never found the arachnid, but sometime during the first week of June, I noticed a golf ball-sized bump on my lower back. It hurt when I sat and leaned against the back of a chair.

After a few days of discomfort — and wondering “What is this thing?” — I went to an urgent care clinic. The nurse on duty was stumped, too, but prescribed an antibiotic. She told me to see my doctor in a few days.

My doctor disagreed with the nurse and prescribed a different antibiotic and steroids to treat whatever it was.

Lyme disease was never discussed.

Over the next week, the bump disappeared, replaced by dull red splotch. At a followup visit on a Friday, my doctor declared success.

The leg pain started on Monday. Incredible pain like I'd never experienced before. It felt like someone grabbed onto my leg muscles at my hips and pulled them tight. Ibuprofen helped, but only for so long. I couldn't sleep. I writhed in pain.

By Wednesday, I was back in the doctor's office. This time a different doctor. Dr. Joop Offerman, who runs a small practice in Morningside, took one look at my back.

“That's Lyme disease,” Offerman said. “A classic case.”

The dull red splotch was the inner ring of Lyme disease's telltale bull's-eye. The outer ring took up most of my back. Offerman took a picture and told me to try to sell the photo to medical textbooks.

“Lyme disease?” I asked. “That's serious, right?”

I knew little about Lyme disease but had heard it can really mess you up. A friend from college had it and was never really the same.

Offerman explained that if you catch it early enough, a hefty course of antibiotics — the same drug used to treat chlamydia, I later learned — can wipe out the disease, and you'll never have symptoms.

He thought we'd caught it early enough. And he was certain it was Lyme disease.

“We could run tests,” Offerman explained to me. “But I learned in medical school: If it looks like s--- and if it smells like s---, you don't have to taste it to see if it's s---.”

Well, that's true, I thought.

I left feeling optimistic that we'd figured it out and everything was going to be OK.

On Thursday — after two doses of antibiotics — I walked without pain. I taught an indoor cycling class at the YMCA that evening and slept soundly that night for the time in days.

On Saturday, feeling good, I lined up with about 567 other people early in the morning at Allegheny County's North Park to attempt the Rachel Carson Trail Challenge, 36 miles from sunup to sundown.

The trail climbs 8,151 feet and drops 8,214 feet as it snakes its way from North Park to the county's Harrison Hills Park. It rained the day before. The first 10 miles were mud. Small creeks swelled to knee-deep streams. My feet didn't dry until mile 20.

I finished in 14 hours and 46 minutes, just before the sundown cutoff. I hobbled across the finish line, no doubt from the trail and not the Lyme disease.

The challenge wasn't supposed to be about Lyme disease for me. It was supposed to be about pushing my limits, seeing how much my body could take and how it felt after 36 brutal miles on the trail.

But ticks and the Lyme disease they can carry are a fact of life now.

I'm pretty sure I got bit while hiking with my girlfriend on Memorial Day weekend through Pittsburgh's Frick Park, a hike on which I would never have thought to take precautions to guard against ticks or check for them afterward.

Even now, I should probably be a little more careful out there.

My father bought a tick removal tool to keep on my key chain. I don't.

My girlfriend bought bug spray with DEET. She reminds me often to put it on. I don't.

But I should. We all should. Because we shouldn't let a little tick or Lyme disease keep us inside.

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*Steve Williams*

