

CAREGIVER RESOURCES

Talking to Kids About Lyme Disease

Age-appropriate language for explaining a parent's or sibling's Lyme disease to children.

The goal: Children do better when they understand what's happening — even imperfectly — than when they sense something is wrong but aren't told what. Honesty, calibrated to age, builds trust and reduces anxiety.

Ages 3–5: Simple and Reassuring

"Mommy/Daddy has an illness called Lyme disease. It means their body hurts sometimes and they get very tired. It's not the kind of sick you can catch from a hug — you can still cuddle. The doctors are helping them feel better. It's okay to feel worried, and it's okay to ask me questions."

Key messages for this age:

- They cannot "catch" Lyme disease from the sick person
- The sick parent/sibling still loves them
- It is not the child's fault
- Adults are helping and the child is safe

Ages 6–10: A Bit More Detail

"Lyme disease is caused by tiny bacteria that got into [name]'s body from a tick bite. Ticks are small bugs that live in grass and woods. The bacteria can make joints hurt, cause really bad tiredness, and make it hard to think clearly sometimes. It's being treated, but it takes time. Some days are better than others."

Key messages for this age:

- Explain what a tick is and basic prevention (good teachable moment)
- Validate that it can be scary or confusing
- Let them ask questions — answer honestly at their level
- Reassure them about routines and stability

Ages 11–17: More Complete Picture

Teenagers can handle more complexity and often feel more anxious when they sense adults aren't being straight with them. Be honest about uncertainty while reassuring them about what is being done.

- Explain that Lyme disease can be complex and recovery can be slow

- Be honest if you don't know all the answers — "the doctors are working on it" is valid
- Acknowledge the impact on family life without making them responsible for it
- Give them a concrete, helpful role if they want one — without burdening them
- Watch for signs of anxiety, depression, or withdrawal and check in regularly

When a Child Has Lyme Disease

Children with Lyme may struggle to articulate or understand their symptoms. School impact, behavioral changes, and social withdrawal can all be signs. Talk openly, involve their school with the help of our School & Work support guide, and advocate loudly.

Helpful phrases for any age:

- "Your feelings make sense. This is hard."
- "You can always ask me questions."
- "This is not your fault, and it's not [sick person's] fault either."
- "The doctors are working on it. We're doing everything we can."

More resources for families at projectlyme.org/lyme-disease/children-and-teens/ and projectlyme.org/support/caregivers-family/