From the Hartford Currant

A tick-borne virus that is untreatable, contractible in as little as 15 minutes and potentially fatal was recently found in Connecticut. But medical experts say there is no reason for the public to worry yet.

The Powassan virus is a strain related to West Nile that can be transmitted to humans by infected ticks, according to the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention.

The virus, which causes symptoms that include fever, headache, vomiting and lethargy, can potentially infect the central nervous system, causing meningitis, encephalitis and long-term neurological problems, according to Theodore Andreadis, director of the Connecticut Agricultural Experiment Station in New Haven.

In an August 2014 report, the Connecticut Department of Public Health classified the Powassan virus as an "emerging tick-borne illness." Tick-borne viruses are most commonly contracted in Connecticut between May and July, when nymphal ticks are searching for food.

Since 2004, there have been 50 cases detected of the virus in humans in the U.S., with 12 cases reported in 2013, according to the CDC.

Andreadis said the virus, which was recently detected in ticks in Branford and Bridgeport, stands in "stark contrast" to Lyme disease because it can be transmitted from a tick to a human in as little as 15 minutes, whereas Lyme disease can take as long as 24 to 48 hours to pass on. It can also be potentially fatal, Andreadis said.

"It does produce a serious disease which can, in some cases, prove to be fatal, and that's not the case in Lyme disease," Andreadis said. "The ticks that are infected with the virus can transmit it very rapidly when they feed."

The Powassan virus was detected in about 3 percent of ticks in sampling areas in Bridgeport and Branford from 2008 to 2012, Andreadis said. He said those were the only two areas of the state sampled in the survey, but that the agricultural experiment station now plans to expand its sampling to other areas of Connecticut to determine how widespread ticks that carry the virus are.

There has never been a reported case of the virus in humans in Connecticut, but there have been 17 reported cases in New York and one in Massachusetts, according to the CDC.

Andreadis said that of the 75 or so cases of the virus in humans that he was familiar with since the disease was first discovered in Powassan, Ontario, in 1958, he thinks only about 10 percent proved fatal. But he cautioned that the potential neurological symptoms caused by an infection could be severe and long-lasting.

"If you survive an infection, you could have long-term neurological problems," Andreadis said. "There's not a whole lot known about that."

Durland Fish, an epidemiology professor at [Yale University](http://www.courant.com/topic/education/colleges-universities/yale-university-OREDU0000166-topic.html), said he is concerend that there is little information or research on the virus. Fish said he thought there needed to be a greater public health emphasis placed on research, education and potentially developing a vaccine to combat the Powassan virus and other tick-borne illnesses.

"I don't think there's a whole lot that people can do about it other than not be bitten by ticks, which I think they already know," Fish said. "But we don't know what happens to all the people that have been bitten by ticks that may be potentially infected."

To avoid tick-borne illnesses, the department of public health suggests that anyone who might be in wooded areas wear long pants, avoid overgrown areas, apply insect repellent and thoroughly examine themselves or others for ticks once indoors.