

WHEN I traveled with my family as a kid, we all placed bets on when my sister would get bitten, stung, or otherwise blood-sucked. My mother dutifully sprayed bug repellent on each of us before we headed outdoors, and most of my family returned unscathed. But my sister Michelle always came back swollen and inflamed. Sometimes, the bites were so bad she needed medical attention and a cortisone shot. And it wasn't just mosquitoes that bugged her: Michelle is also allergic to bees, wasps, and other insects.

Some people are just irresistible to arthropods, says Daniel R. Suiter, Ph.D., an associate professor in the department of entomology at the University of Georgia. Whether you're a bug magnet or an occasional victim, you risk more than just itching, swelling, and pain when bitten. Many insects carry debilitating diseases like malaria and West Nile virus. To avoid becoming a bug's lunch, it helps to know the facts and myths about the most common flyers and crawlers—and the best defense against them.



Bloodsucking mosquitoes are drawn to water, dark colors, and sweat.

# bug off!

Cast off creepy crawlers with our no-nonsense guide to preventing bug bites.

By AMY PATUREL

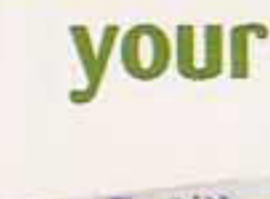
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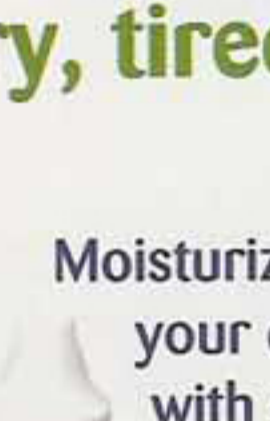


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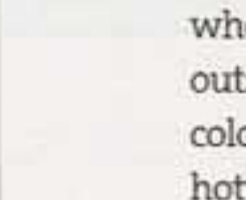
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### Good Medicine



Cover up in loose clothing, long sleeves, and light colors: Roomy men's-style Bush Shirt (\$69) and repellent-treated Sun Hat (\$39) at [www.avis.com](http://www.avis.com). For skin (opposite, from left): Avon Skin-So-Soft Bug Guard Plus (\$12; [www.avon.com](http://www.avon.com)), Beat It! (\$9; [www.shopnatural.com](http://www.shopnatural.com)), and Bite Blocker Bio UD (\$9; [www.drugstore.com](http://www.drugstore.com)).

### Mosquitoes

Once temperatures hit the mid-60s, mosquitoes are out—and ready to bite. As carriers of diseases like malaria, yellow fever, encephalitis, and West Nile virus, mosquitoes are responsible for more human deaths than any other creature. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), confirmed cases of West Nile virus in the United States have risen from 62 in 1999 to more than 4,000 in 2006. In 1999, all 62 cases were confined to New York; today, the virus has been detected in almost all 50 states. But even virus-free mosquitoes cause itchy bites.

**PREVENTION TIPS:** Mosquitoes are drawn to water, dark colors, sweat, and blood. Remove standing water (including your pet's water bowl), which is where female mosquitoes lay their eggs. Stay indoors at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are more abundant. When you do go outside, wear long sleeves and loose-fitting pants in light colors. Dark clothing retains more body heat—and the hotter and sweeter you are, the more likely you are to get bitten. Mosquitoes are also attracted to carbon dioxide—a sign of a warm-blooded host. Products containing 20 percent DEET (*diethyltoluamide*) interfere with insects' ability to sense carbon dioxide, says Greg Sonnen, M.D., a

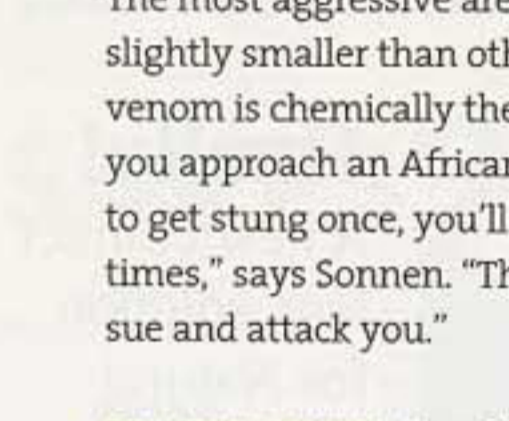
pediatrician at Baylor Health Center in Mesquite, Texas. Spraying the chemical on your skin and clothes confuses mosquitoes so they don't know you're food. If you're sensitive to chemicals, try DEET-free products like Beat It! (\$9; [www.shopnatural.com](http://www.shopnatural.com)), made with citronella, eucalyptus, lemongrass, and sweet orange; soy-based Bite Blocker Bio UD (\$9; [www.drugstore.com](http://www.drugstore.com)); and Avon Skin-So-Soft Bug Guard Plus (\$12; [www.avon.com](http://www.avon.com)), which contains Picaridin, a chemical developed by Bayer. According to a recent report from the Environmental Protection Agency, repellents containing lemon oil or eucalyptus oil offer similar protection to those with low concentrations of DEET but may require more frequent applications. Still, most experts say DEET offers the best protection against potentially deadly bug-borne viruses. (Note: Don't use DEET on children under age 2, and check labels carefully for safety guidelines when using any kind of insect repellent, even the botanical formulas, on children.)

**IF YOU GET BITTEN:** Clean the area and apply hydrocortisone cream to reduce inflammation. It's hard to resist, but don't scratch the area: It only prolongs the itch and can

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lead to scarring. See a doctor if bites swell up dramatically (an indication of an allergic reaction), or if you develop fatigue, sore throat, headache, high fever, confusion, muscle weakness, or other flu-like symptoms.

### Bees and wasps

These flyers come with a full range of stinging capabilities, depending on the species. While most bees die after they sting you, some wasps don't separate from their stinger and can zap you up to four or five times. The most aggressive are Africanized honeybees. They're slightly smaller than other honeybees, and while their venom is chemically the same, they attack in droves. "If you approach an Africanized beehive, you're not going to get stung once, you'll get stung several hundred times," says Sonnen. "The entire hive will actively pursue and attack you."

**PREVENTION TIPS:** Bees like bright colors and sweet scents. Skip the scented odors and perfumes, and leave sugary treats and beverages indoors. Never disturb a beehive or a swarm of bees—they're most likely to strike when they feel threatened. Contact a pest control company if you find a hive near your home.

**IF YOU GET STUNG:** If you respond quickly after being stung, you can actually remove the stinger before it injects all its venom. "The stinger that goes into your skin

has a venom sac attached to it," explains Sonnen. Full injection of venom usually takes about a minute, but you can stop the process by flicking the stinger out with your fingernails or pulling it out with tweezers. Wash the area with soap and water, apply ice, and take an antihistamine and ibuprofen immediately to reduce pain and swelling. See a doctor right away if you have difficulty breathing or are stung several times. "You can go into respiratory distress from a sting and die if you're allergic and don't receive medical attention," says Suiter.

### Ticks

Found in backyards, in the woods, and at the shore, these tiny bloodsuckers lurk on blades of grass, waiting for an unsuspecting host to wander by so they can hop on and attach to the victim's skin. Peak tick season runs from April to November in the Northeast and November to April in the West. In addition to producing a nasty rash, ticks can transmit diseases including Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever, which they've often picked up from previous victims like mice and other animals.

**PREVENTION TIPS:** The carbon dioxide that signals its presence to warm blooded animals and the mosquito that signals its presence to

spot it. Use a pair of tweezers to pull it back slowly and to get the bug to release its head from your skin, or try a special tick-removing device, such as the Tick Nipper (\$6; [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com)). Clean the bitten area with soap and water, and apply an antiseptic. In case infection develops, save the tick in a jar with a tight-fitting lid (so the tick can't escape) for an expert to analyze. Visit your doctor if you see a bull's eye of redness radiating out from the bug bite, which could be a sign of Lyme disease. Other symptoms of Lyme disease (and Rocky Mountain spotted fever, which also merits medical attention) include fever, headache, and muscle or joint pain. The good news: A tick usually must be attached for at least 24 hours to infect you with either of these diseases.

### Fire ants

Fire ants don't bite: They sting. In fact, their stings are similar to bee stings and can trigger serious allergic reactions in some people. "Like Africanized honeybees, fire ants attack in a very organized and aggressive manner when their nests are disturbed," says Sonnen. They're most common in the Southern states but are migrating rapidly.

ence. They love the warm, moist areas under your arms and near your crotch, says Michael P. Zimring, M.D., director of the Center for Wilderness and Travel Medicine at Mercy Medical Center in Baltimore and author of *Healthy Travel: Don't Travel Without It!* (Basic Health Publications, 2005). Wear long sleeves and long pants in light colors so you can easily spot ticks and remove them before they become attached. Tuck your shirt into your pants, your pants into your socks, and wear boots rather than sandals. "As soon as you come indoors, take a shower and do a thorough tick-check," says Zimring. "Or have a significant other check."

DEET in 20 percent to 30 percent concentration is effective in preventing ticks from attaching, but you can get even better protection by using a DEET product on your skin and wearing clothes treated with Permethrin, a chrysanthemum-derived chemical that kills any bugs that aren't repelled by DEET. Check out ExOfficio's line of Permethrin-treated activewear at [www.exofficio.com](http://www.exofficio.com).

**IF YOU GET BITTEN:** To reduce the likelihood of irritation or infection, remove the tick completely as soon as you

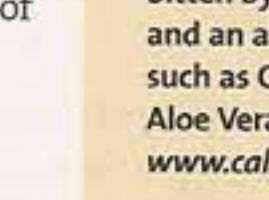
Tick-proof your torso with ExOfficio's Permethrin-treated Buzz Off pull-over (\$65; [www.exofficio.com](http://www.exofficio.com)). If you get bitten, remove the tick with the Tick Nipper (\$6; [www.rei.com](http://www.rei.com)).



IF YOU GET BITTEN: Fire ant stings produce an intense searing sensation, which can last for a few days. A day or so after the sting, pustules or blisters will develop. Clean the area to prevent infection and apply cold compresses and hydrocortisone cream to reduce inflammation. You can alleviate the itch by taking an oral antihistamine or using topical aloe vera. See a doctor if you experience hives, swollen lips, or labored breathing, or a faint faint. Fire ants aren't usually life-threatening, but a large number of simultaneous stings can be deadly.

### Bed bugs

Bed bugs resemble over-toasted sesame seeds. They're dark in color, move quickly, and dine exclusively on the



To soothe the skin that's been bitten by fire ants, apply ice and an aloe vera formula such as California Baby Aloe Vera Cream (\$15; [www.californiababy.com](http://www.californiababy.com)).

### Good Medicine

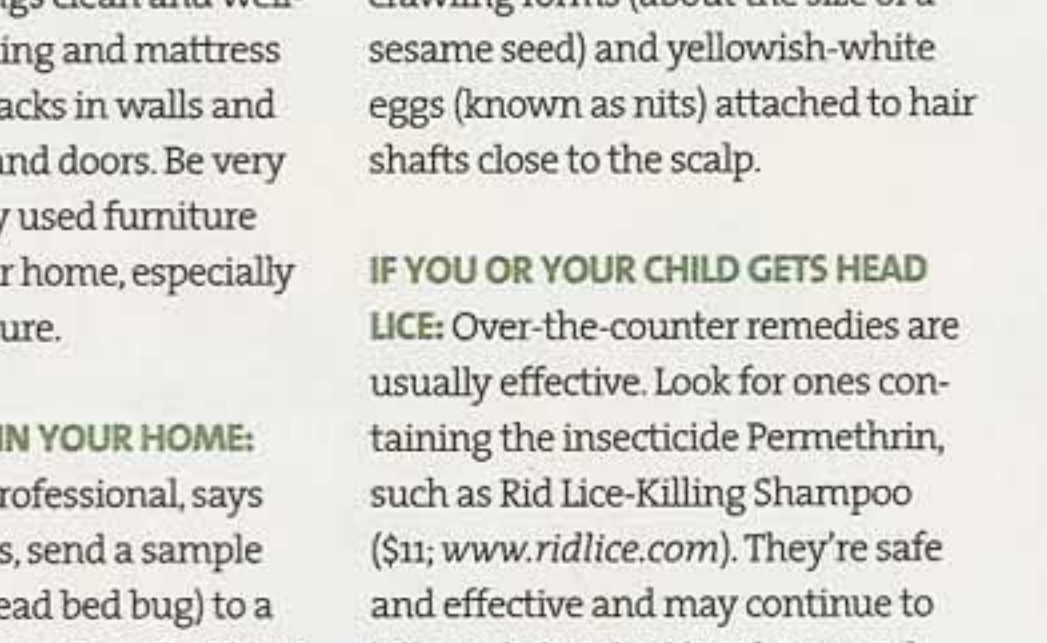


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