

Summer safety

Summer's here. We're all eager to spend more time outdoors digging in the garden or relaxing by the water. Yet between the insect bites, sunburns and poison ivy rashes, summer fun may have unpleasant consequences. Learn what to watch out for to stay tick-free, itch-free and burn-free all season long.

Mosquitoes and disease

The average mosquito bite leads to an itchy bump that goes away after a day or two. But some mosquito bites can be more than a nuisance. On rare occasions bites can have serious health consequences. Serious mosquito-borne diseases include malaria, Zika, West Nile and dengue.

- Malaria had been removed from the U.S. by 1951. The disease is still a problem in South America, Africa and Southeast Asia.
- Zika virus is spread mostly by a mosquito that is active during the day. In adults, symptoms are often mild. They may include a fever, aches or headache. In pregnant women, Zika can cause very serious birth defects to the fetus. In 2016, Zika-infected mosquitoes were found in Florida and Texas. Pregnant women should not travel to areas with Zika. Check the CDC travel page before visiting areas that may have an outbreak.
- Most people who become infected with West Nile virus have no symptoms. About one in five develops fever, body aches, diarrhea or a rash.
- Dengue rarely occurs in the mainland U.S. but can be found in Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands.

To prevent mosquito bites and diseases transmitted by mosquitoes, use an EPA-registered insect repellent. Always follow the label instructions when using insect repellent. Adults should apply the cream or spray to their hands and then apply to a child's skin, being careful to avoid eyes, hands and mouth. Never use insect repellent on babies younger than two months.



Ticks

Most ticks don't carry diseases. Most tick bites won't cause a health problem. You can get a tick bite any time when the temperature is above freezing. High season for tick bites is May and June. It's important to remove a tick as soon as you find it. Steps to prevent tick diseases include:

- Using an insect repellent with at least 20% DEET
- Removing ticks right away
- Avoiding tick habitat, such as areas with tall weeds and grasses

Lyme disease is the most common of the tick-borne diseases. It is passed by the bite of an infected blacklegged tick. Symptoms include fever, headache and a bull's-eye rash. Most cases of Lyme disease can be treated with antibiotics.

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Poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac

There's a trio of plants that can put a real damper on your summer fun. Poison ivy, poison oak and poison sumac all contain urushiol, which causes a painful skin rash upon contact. If you come in contact with any of these plants, the American Academy of Dermatology recommends:

- Immediately rinse your skin with rubbing alcohol, dishwashing soap or detergent.
- Wash your clothing.
- If you don't wash off the urushiol, blisters may appear within hours or a few days.
- Wet compresses, calamine lotion or an antihistamine can help reduce itching and blistering.

The rash is not contagious and does not spread. It may last two or three weeks. The best prevention is to avoid contact with these plants. Use your smartphone to help identify them. Teach family members which plants to avoid.

Sun protection

Don't let a painful sunburn ruin a single day of your summer fun – or contribute to your risk of skin cancer over a lifetime. The Skin Cancer Foundation recommends that people:

- Use a broad-spectrum sunscreen that blocks UVA and UVB rays. Apply it regularly, even on cloudy days.
- Wear a hat with a wide brim. Wear UV-blocking sunglasses too.
- Limit exposure to very reflective surfaces such as sand, water and buildings.
- Stay out of the sun between 10 a.m. and 4 p.m. If your shadow is shorter than you are, the sun's rays are at their most intense. It's time to seek shade.
- If applying sunscreen and insect repellent, apply the sunscreen first.

False hopes

Topical sunscreen is effective. It's also messy and needs to be reapplied often. Oral sunscreen products have begun to appear on the market. You're likely to find them in the dietary supplement aisle. Don't put a lot of faith in these alternative products. They are not medicines so have not undergone the testing needed to receive approval from the FDA (Food and Drug Administration). To date, there is no proof that these products work.

Sun-safe clothing

Lifeguards, landscapers or anyone else who works outside in the summer should consider sun-safe clothing in addition to applying sunscreen. Look for garments with the UPF sun protection label. UPF stands for ultraviolet protection factor. It means the fabric in the piece of clothing has been tested in an approved laboratory. The rating is based on fiber content, fabric weave and color. The Skin Cancer Foundation recommends garments with a UPF of at least 30.

Summary

Awareness combined with insect repellent and sunscreen can go a long way to help protect you and your family from the bites and burns of summer. Be prepared and enjoy your time outdoors!

Sources

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United States Environmental Protection Agency. Repellents: Protection against Mosquitoes, Ticks and Other Arthropods. 2016

American Academy of Dermatology. Poison ivy, oak and sumac. 2017

Skin Cancer Foundation. Skin Cancer Prevention Guidelines Handout. 2016

This handout contains general health and wellness information and is not a substitute for your doctor's care. You should consult an appropriate health care professional for your specific needs. Some treatments mentioned may not be covered by your health plan. Please refer to your benefit plan documents for information about coverage.