

Battling Bugs

Learn more about the bugs you'll find out in the backcountry.

Stingers

Insects such as bees, wasps, yellow jackets and hornets can leave painful stings, but usually don't attack unless they are attacked first. Unfortunately, an unsuspecting hiker can disturb a hive by accident and will suffer the consequences regardless of intent. If you are traveling with other hikers, make sure you alert those behind you if you notice a nest.

When traveling through the woods, be alert for nests in hollow trees, hanging from branches, under logs, in the ground, and sometimes even in the mud or dirt banks of streams. Remember that bees are attracted to bright colors and sweet smells. Bees are also attracted to swift movements. If you do have a bee encounter, stay calm and move slowly. Don't run unless you're being attacked by a swarm, in which case it's best to submerge yourself in water or take refuge in a vehicle or sealed tent.

If you are stung, try to scrape it out with the flat of a knife or a credit card. The stinger will continue to release venom after the bee is dead, so be quick. Ice packs or cold, wet compresses will ease the pain. If you notice an unusual reaction to the sting, such as extensive swelling, nausea, shortness of breath, or a rapid heart rate, seek medical help immediately as you may be experiencing an anaphylaxis. If you already know you are allergic to bee stings, you should carry your bee-sting kit with you at all times. Alert your hiking partners to your condition and teach them how to administer the treatment as well.

Flies & Mosquitoes

Even the most common horse and house flies can transmit diseases. Although you can best protect yourself by avoiding travel during peak fly seasons, which vary widely by region, wearing insect repellent and covering exposed skin (i.e., wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants, and a wide brimmed hat) can reduce susceptibility. Keeping a clean camp, which includes bagging garbage as it is generated and covering all food, will also help.

Mosquitoes are most effectively repelled by DEET, but wearing long pants, a long-sleeved shirt, ankle-high shoes, and a cap that covers your ears will help, too. In the height of mosquito season, you may also want to wear a head net and gloves. Steer clear of stagnant water or fields of damp grass.

Mosquitoes are scarce during the heat of the day and when winds rise above ten miles per hour. Instead, they prefer the cooler periods from dusk until dawn. If you are bitten, a soothing lotion or bug treatment will generally relieve the discomfort and reduce swelling and itching.



Ticks

Ticks are another pest for hikers and can sometimes carry Lyme Disease or Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. To learn more about keeping ticks off of you and what to do if you find one, please refer to our Ticks fact sheet.

Spiders

Although spiders are not actually insects, they too come with the hiking territory and can also pack a nasty bite. Spiders are most often found in basements, woodpiles, and garages and other outbuildings so be on the lookout when visiting the outhouse or gathering firewood. In general, look before poking your fingers into nooks and crannies. It's also a good idea to shake out shoes and clothes before putting them on and to give your sleeping bag a good shake before getting in it for the night.

General guidelines

If you venture into the woods, you'll undoubtedly encounter one or more of the insects mentioned above, as well as countless other less common species of bugs. Although no method is foolproof, there are some general defense mechanisms to follow:

- Learn which bugs are prevalent in which areas and in which seasons and avoid peak times. For example, snowmelt in the high-country is mosquito season. June and early July in northern New England belong to the infamous black flies.
- Be cautious of areas you can't see. Don't place your hands or any other part of your body under rocks, bushes, logs or tents without making a careful inspection first.
- Wear protective clothing including a long-sleeved shirt and long pants that are snug at the wrists and ankles, heavy socks, and a hat.
- Avoid wearing perfumes and scented lotions, hair sprays, shampoos, soaps or cosmetics. Also limit shiny objects such as jewelry and buckles.
- Cover all exposed areas of your body with insect repellent and reapply frequently, especially if you're working up a sweat. DEET is the strongest, most reliable repellent, but may not be safe for small children. A citronella product is an acceptable natural alternative. Insect repellent can also be rubbed on your clothing and pack.
- When camping, use a tent with a sewn-in floor and mosquito netting on doors and windows.
- Keep camping area clear of garbage and other rotting debris, especially food products.
- Don't walk around the campsite with bare feet.



This fact sheet was originally created by and is reprinted with permission of American Hiking Society