

# Summer Safety

## BEWARE OF THE CRITTERS THAT BITE



by **Tony C. Wu, M.D.**, *University Medicine*

Summer is a wonderful time to enjoy the outdoors. From the city to the suburbs, it's important to protect yourself from the health hazards that exist as you venture out and about.

Whether walking in the city or putting around your garden or backyard, critters of all types can be found within our Rhode Island borders. Some are miniscule in size, such as deer ticks, but their bite can cause long-term illness and even lead to death. Others can cause medical interactions from a scratch or a sting. Here's a run-down of the most common pests and the basic treatments you can administer (as always, be sure to seek proper medical care from your physician for any animal or insect bites):

**Mosquitoes:** Mosquitoes can carry West Nile Virus, Eastern Equine Encephalitis, malaria and yellow fever. The Zika virus is another mosquito-borne disease that has been connected to deformities in newborn babies. The Rhode Island Department of Health reports that the mosquitoes that carry the Zika virus are not established in the state, but travelers to regions where the virus is prevalent can be carriers.

**Treatment:** Mosquito bites go away on their own. Calamine lotion and hydrocortisone cream can help ease the itch. Try not to scratch the red itchy bump at the site of the bite as that can cause additional irritation to your skin. See your doctor if you experience symptoms such as but not limited to fever, headache, body aches, stiff neck, vomiting, or nausea.

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**Ticks:** Deer ticks, which can cause Lyme Disease and Babesiosis, are prevalent particularly in Jamestown and Northern Rhode Island. Ticks can bite humans and other animals. Typically a tick bite causes minor itching and irritation.

**Treatment:** Use tweezers to pull the tick up and out of the skin, then wash the bite with soap and water and watch for signs of infection. See your doctor if you experience symptoms such as but not limited to a red spot or rash near the bite site or elsewhere, neck stiffness, a headache, muscle or joint pains and aches, and a fever.

**Gypsy Moth Caterpillars:** According to the RI Department of Environmental Management, a significant gypsy moth caterpillar infestation is anticipated. They don't just defoliate our trees; they can also cause a rash or allergy-like symptoms in some people. You could be sitting on the grass without touching any caterpillars, but could still develop an itchy rash or welts similar to poison ivy. The caterpillars' small hairs, which cause the reaction, can be carried by the wind onto your skin or clothing.

**Treatment:** Your doctor may recommend topical creams such as those containing cortisone to relieve the itching.

**Bees:** Wasps, bees and yellow jackets can sting, especially if they are protecting a nest built in or near a home or if they are near a food source such as a trash receptacle. Bee stings usually cause only mild pain, itching and swelling, but people with bee allergies are at risk of a severe, life-threatening reaction such as anaphylactic shock.

**Treatment:** Scrape the stinger off the skin, as pulling it out may cause more venom to go into the bite. Apply ice or cold compresses to reduce pain and swelling. Anaphylactic shock must be treated quickly with epinephrine for people who are allergic to insect venom or it may cause death. A kit which

contains the proper treatment drugs must be kept nearby or carried at all times.

**Snakes:** According to the RI Department of Environmental Management, there are no venomous species of native snakes in our state. You may recall a man in East Providence was bitten by a venomous copperhead snake a few years ago while watering his yard, which turned out to be an escapee from an exotic pet owner. There are, however, rattlesnake populations in Connecticut and Massachusetts. Watch where you step and use sticks to turn logs and rocks. Wear proper footwear. Stay calm if you encounter a snake. Snakes do not care to encounter humans and will generally flee if given the opportunity.

**Treatment:** Any snake bite should be treated as an emergency because many people do not know what kind of snake has bitten them, and even nonpoisonous snakes can cause infection or allergic reaction from a bite. Wash the bitten area with soap and water and see your doctor as soon as possible.

**Spiders:** Most spiders are harmless. Most are shy and like to hide under rocks, leaves, in woodpiles and dark places, or even in or around water. Occasionally they are accidentally transported by humans in cars and luggage. Two types of rare, venomous spiders have been found in Rhode Island: the black widow and brown recluse. They will bite if they are threatened or trapped.

**Treatment:** Spider bites can cause pain, nausea, fever and cramps but the majority cause only swelling and a blister. Following a brown recluse bite, the skin around the bite may quickly become warm and swollen and within 15 minutes, dizziness and nausea set in. There is no known antidote, so treatment involves antibiotics, antihistamines and steroids for up to eight weeks. Seek medical attention immediately if you notice any tissue breakdown near the bite site or have trouble breathing.

SOURCE: [www.HumanIllnesses.com](http://www.HumanIllnesses.com)

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*Established in 2000, University Medicine is a nonprofit primary care, specialty outpatient and sub-specialty medical group practice with over 200 physicians and multiple patient care locations across the state of Rhode Island. One of the largest physician groups in Rhode Island, University Medicine is affiliated with The Warren Alpert Medical School of Brown University, and employs most of the full-time faculty of Brown's Department of Medicine. Specialties and clinical divisions include: general internal medicine; primary care; diabetes and endocrinology; infectious disease; hospital medicine; hypertension and kidney diseases; hematology/oncology; nephrology; pulmonary, critical care and sleep; gastroenterology; rheumatology and geriatrics. The three-part mission of University Medicine is high-level quality medical patient care, state-of-the-art clinical research studies, and dedicated teaching of more than 400 Brown University medical students, residents and fellows trained by University Medicine physicians annually. University Medicine is headquartered at 17 Virginia Avenue in Providence, RI 02905-4406; phone: 877-771-7401; web: <http://www.umfmed.org>*

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