

How To Stop Kissing Bugs From Puckering Up On You

Leimone Waite, Master Gardener, May 10, 2019

Q: I have several bites that I believe came from a kissing bug. I have read that they carry Chagas disease, so I'm worried. How do I get rid of them from my house?

A: Kissing bugs (Conenose bugs) are members of a family of true bugs commonly referred to as assassin bugs. They get this name because most of the bugs in this family are predators of other insects and are generally considered to be beneficial bugs. Conenose bugs (kissing bugs) are an exception to the family rule and are bloodsucking parasites. They feed on a wide variety of animals including livestock, pets and humans.



Courtesy photo of skin reactions to the bites from a kissing bug on the leg of Olney resident Jennifer Bankston. (Photo: Courtesy photo)

Kissing bugs are found most often in the foothill areas surrounding the Central Valley, and in the foothills and desert areas of Southern California.

Conenose bug (aka kissing or assassin bug): Stealthy bloodsuckers that feast as their prey sleep. There are about 15 species. Those in California and the Southwest are the most problematic, and humans are a popular item on the menu. (Photo: nathanphot/Getty Images)

According to the University of California Integrated Pest Management site, “the most important species in California is *Triatoma protracta*, the western bloodsucking conenose, with *T. rubida* also present and important.

Both species live in the nests of wood rats or pack rats (*Neotoma* species) and other wildlife, but they also fly into homes and may feed on people. Although the biting process is painless, people often experience an intense itch or tenderness at the bite site, which can become swollen and reddish to purple. Worse, in sensitive individuals, bites from conenose bugs can produce allergic reactions that are potentially dangerous and life-threatening.”



Kissing bugs are known carriers of Chagas disease, a debilitating and sometimes deadly disease, but this does not seem to be a problem in the United States, according to the Pest Notes, Conenose Bugs UC ANR Publication 7455: “Researchers attribute the low incidence of Chagas disease in humans in the U.S. to poor efficacy of disease transmission by the bugs, infrequent human contact and inability of the bugs to permanently colonize homes. High rates of insect infection — would suggest the possibility that the disease might become a problem in the United States as

the global climate changes. Chagas disease is already a serious problem among dogs in some areas of south Texas.”



The kissing bug has been found in 27 states in the lower United States, where it likely has thrived for at least a century. (Photo: Photo courtesy Texas A&M)

These pests are attracted to lights in the house at night. They fly in when they find an opening, or crawl in through cracks or pet doors. They usually bite at night, with several chomps occurring in clusters on the face, neck or limbs. The initial bite is painless but is followed by swelling and itching that can last for several days. Approximately 10 percent of people are allergic; they may experience more severe

swelling or a much worse reaction.

Bites from conenose bugs may be often be confused with a spider bite. However, most spiders do not bite in clusters.

Chagas disease was once believed to be a Latin American problem, but the infection is spread mostly by an insect that lives in 27 states, but mostly in Texas, Arizona, and New Mexico.

Conenose bug bites usually occur in the late spring to early summer and not at other times.

To prevent problems with kissing bugs:

- Remove places that harbor them such as rodent nests, piles of wood or lumber, or other debris within 300 feet of the house.
- Screen all windows and doors and caulk or eliminate cracks.
- Pay attention to lights around and in the house as they are attracted to white light.
- Move inside lights away from doors and windows, especially during the next couple of months.
- Change outdoor lighting to yellow light as they are less attracted to this color.
- Shake out bedding at night before getting into bed and keep bedding from touching the floor. Also keep beds away from the walls by at least a foot.

To read more about these pests go to: <http://ipm.ucanr.edu/PMG/PESTNOTES/pn7455.html>

The Shasta Master Gardeners Program can be reached by phone at 242-2219 or email mastergardener@shastacollege.edu. The gardener office is staffed by volunteers trained by the University of California to answer gardeners' questions using information based on scientific research.