

Choosing an Insect Repellent for Your Child

Mosquitoes, biting flies, and tick bites can make children miserable. While most children have only mild reactions to insect bites, some children can become very sick. One way to protect your child from biting insects is to use insect repellents. However, it's important that insect repellents are used safely and correctly. Read on for more information from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) about types of repellents, DEET, using repellents safely, and other ways to protect your child from insect bites.

Types of Repellents

Insect repellents come in many forms, including aerosols, sprays, liquids, creams, and sticks. Some are made from chemicals and some have natural ingredients. Insect repellents prevent bites from biting insects but not stinging insects. Biting insects include mosquitoes, ticks, fleas, chiggers, and biting flies. Stinging insects include bees, hornets, and wasps.

Available Repellents

DEET: Chemical repellents with DEET (N,N-diethyl-3-methylbenzamide) are considered the best defense against biting insects. DEET lasts about 2 to 5 hours depending on the concentration of DEET in the product.

Caution should be used when applying DEET to children.

Picaridin: In April 2005 the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommended other repellents that may work as well as DEET: repellents with picaridin and repellents with oil of lemon eucalyptus or 2% soybean oil. Currently these products have a duration of action that is comparable to that of about 10% DEET. They last about 3 to 8 hours depending on the concentration. Although these products are considered safe when used as recommended, long-term follow-up studies are not available. Also, more studies need to be done to see how well they repel ticks.

Essential oils: Repellents made from essential oils found in plants such as citronella, cedar, eucalyptus, and soybean and last usually less than 2 hours.

Chemical repellents with Permethrin: These repellents kill ticks on contact. When applied to clothing, it lasts even after several washings. Should only be applied to clothing, not directly to skin. May be applied to outdoor equipment such as sleeping bags or tents.

NOTE: The following types of products are not effective repellents: Wristbands soaked in chemical repellents. Garlic or vitamin B1 taken by mouth. Ultrasonic devices that give off sound waves designed to keep insects away. Bird or bat houses. Backyard bug zappers (Insects may actually be attracted to your yard).

About DEET

DEET is a chemical used in insect repellents. The amount of DEET in insect repellents varies from product to product, so it's important to read the label of any product you use. Studies show that products with higher amounts of DEET protect people longer. For example, products with amounts around 10% may repel pests for about 2 hours, while products with amounts of about 24% last an average of 5 hours. But studies also show that products with amounts of DEET greater than 30% don't offer any extra protection. The AAP recommends that repellents should contain no more than 30% DEET when used on children. Insect repellents also are not recommended for children younger than 2 months.

Tips for Using Repellents Safely

Do: Read the label and follow all directions and precautions. Only apply insect repellents on the outside of your child's clothing and on exposed skin. Note: Permethrin-containing products should not be applied to skin. Spray repellents in open areas to avoid breathing them in. Use just enough repellent to cover your child's clothing and exposed skin. Using more doesn't make the repellent more effective. Avoid reapplying unless needed. Help apply insect repellent on young children. Supervise older children when using these products. Wash your children's skin with soap and water to remove any repellent when they return indoors, and wash their clothing before they wear it again.

Don't: Never apply insect repellent to children younger than 2 months. Never spray insect repellent directly onto your child's face. Instead, spray a little on your hands first and then rub it on your child's face. Avoid the eyes and mouth. Do not spray insect repellent on cuts, wounds, or irritated skin. Do not use products that combine DEET with sunscreen. The DEET may make the sun protection factor (SPF) less effective. These products can overexpose your child to DEET because the sunscreen needs to be reapplied often.

Reactions to Insect Repellents

If you suspect that your child is having a reaction, such as a rash, to an insect repellent, stop using the product and wash your child's skin with soap and water. Then call Poison Help at 1-800-222-1222 or your child's doctor for help. If you go to your child's doctor's office, take the repellent container with you.

