

Zika Virus: How to Protect Yourself

By: Judy Koutsky



As the summer nears, mosquito season heads into high gear.

With continued warnings about the Zika virus, it's no wonder that some travelers may be looking for Zika-free destinations for their summer vacations: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), there have already been 426 travel-associated Zika infections in the U.S., and that number is likely to increase as the weather warms up. So what can you do to protect yourself and your family, without locking yourself indoors for the summer or stressing over your travel plans? Conde Nast Traveler asked the experts about the bug sprays that work best—and the non-spray options that will help keep mosquitoes at bay.

1. OVER-THE-COUNTER BUG SPRAY

When it comes to sprays, all brands are not created equal. "Consumer reports found that products containing 20 percent picaridin, like Sawyer Picaridin Insect Repellent, or 25 percent DEET, like Off! Deep Woods, were the most effective," says Alan J. Parks, MD, dermatologist and founder of Eastside Dermatology & Skin Care Center in Columbus, Ohio. Which to use? According to the CDC, repellents that contain DEET offer the best protection against mosquito bites. However, Dr. Parks says "the picaridin would be less toxic than DEET."

2. SPECIALLY-TREATED CLOTHING

"The military has been using clothing impregnated with a repellent called permethrin for decades, and now the technology—called Insect Shield—is EPA-registered and available to consumers," says Joe Conlon, medical entomologist and technical adviser to the American Mosquito Control Association. Conlon notes that the consumer version lasts for about 70 washings and is also effective against ticks. While Insect Shield sells its clothing (and you can send in your own clothing to them to be treated), the technology is also widely available—embedded in other manufacturer's clothing and as a liquid to treat your own clothing—in stores and online.

3. HERBS AND ESSENTIAL OILS

“Essential oils—including citronella, rose geranium, and lemon—are particularly effective for repelling insects,” says, Nathaniel Whitmore, a master herbalist who gives presentations on edible and medicinal plants at The Lodge of Woodloch. “Just mix these oils with water and use in a spray bottle.” Another option, he says, is chewing on plants or eating foods in the Allium family. “Wild leeks and chives, which emit a pungent odor that insects don’t like, are very effective. So is garlic.” You may have strong breath, but it might be worth it to keep the bugs away.

4. LIGHT-COLORED CLOTHING AND GEAR

Whether it's a tent, sleeping bag, or clothes, pick light colors says, **Gabrielle Francis DC, ND, LAc, a naturopathic doctor who practices in New York City**. “Mosquitoes like dark colors, and can often bite through fabric.” Instead, wear clothes in white, beige, or light khaki colors and choose these colors for camping and hiking gear (like tents and duffel bags). Always remember to wear long pants, long-sleeve shirts, and socks at dusk and dawn, when mosquitoes are most active.

5. SUNSCREEN AND REPELLANT COMBO

Wearing sunscreen with bug repellent mixed in can be a smart and easy way to ward off mosquitoes, but you don't want to overdo it. Instead of applying it all day, save a combo sunscreen for late afternoon, when you're ready to apply your last dose of for the day. “During the day you should be applying sunscreen frequently, but you don’t want to apply DEET or even natural repellents more often than is recommended,” says Conlon. Instead, he advises using two different products—regular sunscreen for daytime, and then a combo sunscreen for end of day.

One final piece of advice: Look for an EPA registration number—usually on the back label—on any repellent you’re considering buying. To get it, a product has to undergo testing for safety and effectiveness. “If it hasn’t been EPA-registered,” says Conlon, “I would not use it.”