

Kissing Bugs and Chagas Disease



Photo Source: <http://wwwnc.cdc.gov/eid/article/16/3/09-0648-f1.htm>

Below is information regarding Kissing bugs and Chagas disease from Dr. Hinkle, UGA Department of Entomology. *Please feel free to bring in a sample to the **UGA Extension office at 140 Stonewall Avenue West, Suite 209, Fayetteville, Georgia** if you find an insect you are unsure about.*

Kissing bugs have been in Georgia for millions of years. They, and their relatives such as leaf-footed bugs and wheel bugs, are common. Kissing bugs are not deadly and most of them are not infected with the parasite that causes Chagas disease.

The Chagas disease parasite is transmitted only by the feces of specific kissing bugs. In other words, being bitten by the bug will not harm you but rubbing the bug's excrement in your eyes might make you sick.

While Chagas disease is not uncommon in Central and South America, only 23 cases acquired here in the U.S. have been reported in the last 60 years. Areas of Texas just north of Mexico have lots of infected kissing bugs, and that's why Texas is in the news.

For us here in the Southeast, the risk isn't being bitten by a kissing bug (very little chance of that). The riskier behavior would be cleaning up raccoon, opossum, skunk or armadillo nests; that's where the bugs live and where kissing bug feces are most concentrated. The animals aren't the risk, nor is the bite of the bug; we can get infected with Chagas disease only by getting the bug's feces inside us – through a break in the skin, through swallowing, through inhalation, or through rubbing our eyes. Again, not much risk if we stay away from the nests of wild animals.

Not every potential reservoir is infected. Here in the Southeast very few of the bugs carry the parasite. In the U.S. we are more likely to die in an automobile accident than to ever in our whole lives get infected with Chagas disease.

What can you do?

- ◆ Keep bugs out of your home by turning off porch lights at night to avoid attracting the bugs.

- ◆ Seal around doors and windows with weather-stripping and replace door sweeps; if cold air can't get in, neither can kissing bugs.
- ◆ And, of course, freezing cold nights are sending kissing bugs into hibernation, so the risk is even lower this time of year.
- ◆ Give thanks for your cozy home that protects you from kissing bugs.