

DEET Insect Repellents Have Proven Their Safety

Millions of Floridians use a topical insect repellent as they work and play outdoors. Many apply products that contain DEET, an ingredient that protects against mosquitoes and ticks.

A question has recently emerged about the human health risk posed by DEET-based products. In an interview with G.B. Crawford, the University of Florida's Jeffrey Bloomquist noted that the claim is not supported by scientific evidence.

Crawford: Jeffrey Bloomquist, a faculty member at the University of Florida's Emerging Pathogens Institute and also the Entomology and Nematology Department at the university's Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, has reviewed the scientific literature and has found no significant health threat posed by the DEET compound. The common use of this chemical over the course of the past 50 years has demonstrated its general safety.

Bloomquist: Sales information for DEET products versus others are not readily available. But DEET is formulated in over 500 commercial products. So it is very likely to be the case that it is one of the dominant personal protection repellents that is used in the state of Florida and probably nationwide.

Crawford: Bloomquist noted that users can enhance the safety of a DEET-based product and reduce minor irritation by applying it with care.

Bloomquist: If you use it properly and that is, if you use it sparingly. Don't over-apply it. We talk about a serious side effect – the range of those is rather quite narrow. There have been deaths that have occurred from DEET exposure, but it's actually been suicide attempts. Poor, misguided people have drunk large doses of DEET in order to harm themselves.

Most of the time, if there is any effect at all, and usually there isn't, there can be some mild skin irritation – dermatitis – and obviously eye irritation, so you want to keep it away from your face and certainly away from your eyes.

Crawford: He offered guidance for the use DEET-based repellents to eliminate even mild discomfort.

Bloomquist: Well, the first is that they can be used safely on children. Use it judiciously. Don't over-apply it. Don't let children apply it to themselves. Have an adult in charge of this. Don't apply it directly to an infant. That's basically something you don't want to do. If you can cover a stroller maybe – if you have an infant, you could cover the front with a treated net of some kind.

But DEET can also be effective when you apply it to clothing. It doesn't always have to be applied to the skin. You should test a maybe little bit of the cloth that you might apply it to so you make sure that it doesn't bleed the dye – in other words, the color fastness.

Crawford: Bloomquist follows his own advice when using DEET repellents himself.

Bloomquist: I like to fish and I don't put DEET so much on my face. But if I apply to my hat, I find that's usually enough to keep mosquitoes away from my face and neck. That works pretty well for me and I don't see why it couldn't work that way for others.

This is G.B. Crawford for Florida Farm Bureau's *Newsline*.