

## Staying Safe on a Hike

Staying healthy can make your hiking experience more enjoyable. Becoming familiar with things you might encounter on the trail and preparing for potential hazards can keep you and your hiking partners safe. It is important to make safety your first priority. The great outdoors can sometimes bring along a few discomforts. It is a must that you carry along a standard first aid kit to deal with any emergencies or injuries. You might also encounter bugs and plants that cause pain and itching. It is important to be able to identify these things and avoid contact if at all possible. This fact sheet will help you to design your first aid kit and recognize some of the not-so-friendly species you might face on a hike.

### Your First Aid Kit

A standard first aid kit will help you treat minor injuries, such as cuts, bumps, bruises, bug bites, aches, and pains. If major injuries should occur, supplies in your kit might help you stabilize the injury until you get more help.

Pay special attention to the size of the supplies you'll be carrying and the container. If you will be backpacking, you don't want the supplies to be too heavy. If you are hiking in an area where you will have close access to your car, be sure to keep the full kit in your car and consider carrying a few things with you in a small waist bag or backpack.

The American Red Cross recommends that the following items below be included in your first aid kit:

- 20 - adhesive bandages, various sizes
- 1 - 5" x 9" sterile dressing
- 1 - conforming roller gauze bandage
- 2 - triangular bandages
- 2 – 3" x 3" sterile gauze pads
- 2 – 4" x 4" sterile gauze pads
- 1 - roll 3" cohesive bandage
- 2 - germicidal hand wipes or waterless alcohol-based hand sanitizer
- 6 - antiseptic wipes
- 2 - pair large medical grade nonlatex gloves
- Adhesive tape, 2" width
- Antibacterial ointment
- Cold pack
- Scissors (small, personal)
- Tweezers
- CPR breathing barrier, such as a face shield



Other nonprescription items you might consider adding to take care of aches and pains that might arise:

- Aspirin or nonaspirin pain reliever
- Anti-itch ointment
- Antacid

## **Beware of the Bugs**

### **Mosquitoes**

- ***What are they?***  
Mosquitoes are small, dark-colored flying insects that feed on human and animal blood with syringe-like mouthparts.
- ***What's the danger?***  
A small percentage of Kentucky mosquitoes carry diseases such as West Nile encephalitis and St. Louis. These diseases are extremely rare in humans and are typically only serious in individuals with compromised immune systems.
- ***How to protect yourself:***  
On exposed skin, use over-the-counter bug repellants made with DEET. For children, use DEET products formulated for children.

### **Bees, Ants, and Wasps**

- ***What are they?***  
Bees, ants, and wasps are all closely related insects and many sting or bite humans in defense of themselves or their colonies. All hive-dwelling bees and wasps in Kentucky have bold yellow, black, and white color patterns.
- ***What's the danger?***  
Allergic reactions resulting from the stings of bees, ants, and wasps cause more serious medical problems than any other insect- or spider-related injury, especially since these insects will sometimes attack as a group when protecting a hive. Serious reactions from multiple stings can lead to serious illness or even death. Although these complications are rare, everyone should avoid stings.
- ***How to protect yourself:***  
Avoid areas where these insects congregate and watch that children do not grab these insects or disturb their nests. If the insects or their colonies are not threatened, they will not bother humans. If you have had serious reactions to stings in the past, consult a physician to find out what to do if you are stung.

### **Chiggers**

- ***What are they?***  
Chiggers are tiny (nearly microscopic) relatives of ticks. They feed on the skin of humans and animals.
- ***What's the danger?***  
In Kentucky, chiggers are common and the bites can be annoying. But these creatures do not spread disease, and serious complications are extremely rare. Chiggers do not actually burrow into skin; this is a myth. Instead, chiggers briefly feed on skin and drop away after a few minutes. The resulting rash is caused by an allergic reaction to the bites.

- **How to protect yourself:**  
Avoid walking through high grass and weeds. Chiggers climb these plants for the purpose of grabbing onto hosts. Also, use over-the-counter bug repellants made with DEET, especially on the feet and lower legs. For children, use DEET products formulated for children.

## Ticks

- **What are they?**  
Ticks are small, dark-colored parasites of humans and animals. They attach themselves to skin and feed on blood for several hours or days before dropping off.
- **What's the danger?**  
In Kentucky, diseases from ticks are very rare, but occasional cases of Lyme disease and Rocky Mountain spotted fever have been recorded in areas where deer are common (about 10 to 20 cases of each disease are recorded each year, a small number). Ticks must be attached for at least 24 hours for either of these diseases to be transmitted, so early detection and removal of ticks is an easy way to avoid problems.
- **How to protect yourself:**  
As with chiggers, avoid ticks by keeping out of high grass and weeds where ticks climb for the purpose of grabbing onto hosts. Also, use over-the-counter bug repellants made with DEET, especially on the feet and lower legs. For children, use DEET products formulated for children. Each day after hiking, search the whole body for ticks. To remove attached ticks, use fine-point tweezers and grasp the tick just behind the point of attachment and pull slowly. Vaseline, matches, nail-polish remover, and other methods of removal are not effective. Wash the bite area, apply antiseptic and cover with a bandage.

## Spiders

- **What are they?**  
Spiders are close relatives of insects, but have eight legs instead of six. All spiders are predators of insects and other small creatures. Many spiders catch prey in webs, others hunt on the ground or on vegetation for prey.
- **What's the danger?**  
All spiders have venomous fangs, and most are capable of biting people. However, a spider will only bite if grabbed, stepped on, or similarly disturbed. The bites of most spiders are no more serious than mosquito bites, but Kentucky has two spider species that can cause serious bites. The black widow is a shiny black spider, often with red markings. It is common in wooded areas but will always be found in its web in hidden areas, such as under rocks, in hollow logs, or in deep weed or bramble. The brown recluse spider is a small brown spider common in Kentucky buildings, but it is rarely found outdoors.



Black widow



Brown recluse

- **How to protect yourself:**

Avoid touching any spider and stay out of tall weeds. Treat bites from most spiders as though they were small cuts. Black widow and brown recluse bites, though rare, should receive immediate medical attention.

### **Other Bugs**

Most other bugs in Kentucky are harmless, with a few minor exceptions. In addition to mosquitoes, there are a few other types of biting flies, including horse flies, deer flies, and robber flies. Their bites can be annoying, but none of these flies transmit disease, and bites should be treated as minor cuts. Also, a few species of caterpillars have stinging spines that can cause reactions similar to bee and wasp stings. Luckily, these caterpillars are rare, and they never sting as a group like bees and wasps. However, anyone with sensitivity to bee stings should treat caterpillar stings according to instructions from a physician.

## **Protect Yourself from Poisonous Plants**

### **Poison Ivy**

Poison ivy is a climbing or trailing, deciduous woody vine with three leaflets, each about four inches long. Leaflets can be toothed or lobed and vary in shape, but often are egg-shaped and smooth (hairless). The leaflet stalks are short except on the middle leaflet. When growing as a climbing vine, poison ivy attaches itself to trees or rocks. On older plants, aboveground roots give the stems a hairy, fibrous appearance. In autumn, leaves often turn bright red and then drop by midseason, leaving the woody stems. Plants produce small yellowish-green flowers from May through June. Greenish to grayish white berries are produced in late summer and can stay on the vine throughout the winter.



Poison Ivy



Poison Oak

### **Poison Oak**

Poison oak is similar in appearance to poison ivy except it resembles a shrub instead of a vining plant. It grows up to 3 ½ feet tall with thick leaves (three leaflets). Each leaflet resembles an oak leaf with notched lobes. Leaves have fine to dense hair on both sides.

Poison ivy and poison oak occur near the same areas or habitats. All parts of both plants (leaves, stems, roots, and fruits) contain a chemical known as urushiol (oo-roo-shee-ohl), which causes inflammation of the skin, a rash, blistering, and itching. Urushiol can be

transmitted in smoke or by direct contact with the plant and can remain active on objects and in dead plants for over a year.

### **Prevention and Treatment**

The reactions and the prevention and treatment methods are the same for both of these plants. The best way to prevent exposure to is to avoid contact with the plants. If you find you have come into contact with poison ivy or poison oak, follow these steps:

- While outdoors, cleanse the skin with rubbing alcohol and then wash the skin with water.
- Take a shower with soap and water. Avoid using soap before cleansing the skin with alcohol. Soap can move urushiol around on the skin, making exposure worse if the urushiol has not been cleansed with alcohol.
- All objects and clothing that have come into contact with the urushiol either by way of the plant or your skin should be cleansed with rubbing alcohol.
- To deal with the rash and itching, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration finds over-the-counter ointments, often called hydrocortisones, safe for temporary relief.
- If your reaction is severe, or if you have had a severe reaction to poison ivy or poison oak in the past, see a doctor immediately.

### **Sources:**

American Red Cross, <http://www.redcross.org>

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