



Kissing bugs in Georgia not cause for Chagas' disease worry

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Kissing bugs are not a public health concern in Georgia.

Between media coverage of Texas kissing bugs transmitting Chagas' disease to people and a recent news article reporting that a "deadly" kissing bug was found in Georgia, people are worried. Fortunately, here in the Southeast, these insects are not a public health concern.

Kissing bugs are in the insect family Reduviidae, which includes several different species, such as beneficial assassin bugs and large, menacing looking wheel bugs (*Arilus cristatus*). While these insects can deliver a painful bite if handled, they're not the Genus of insect that carries the *Trypanosoma cruzi* parasite that causes Chagas' disease.



Wheel bugs (above) are often mistaken for kissing bugs.

Although kissing bugs have been present in the Southeast for many decades, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, located in Atlanta, has never recorded a case of Chagas' disease caused by the parasite some of the insects may carry. Blood-feeders, kissing bugs in Georgia tend to live in the nests and burrows of their animal hosts, typically raccoons, opossums, skunks and armadillos. Furthermore, the parasite doesn't pass from insect to mammal through a bite. Instead, if the trypanosome parasite is present, it is shed through the feces of infected

insects. Humans can become infected by ingesting or inhaling the feces, or by getting it into their eyes or into a cut or break in the skin.

Kissing bugs will bite humans, especially if they are handled; however, in Georgia, we have certain advantages over areas of Central and South America where Chagas' disease is endemic. First, our homes tend to be well-sealed, which limits opportunities for the nocturnal insects to visit us as we sleep. Second, the kissing bugs present in Georgia behave differently than those in other regions of the world. In Central and South America, kissing bugs tend to defecate immediately after feeding, leaving potentially parasite-infected feces next to the feeding wound, where it may be scratched into the broken skin. In Georgia, kissing bugs usually move away from the host before defecating. Since the parasite is transmitted through the insect's feces, not through the bite, the victim is much less likely to be exposed to it.

Homeowners with concerns about kissing bugs can take measures to keep insects from entering the house. Repair damaged window screens, replace weather-stripping around doors and windows, and install door sweeps to seal small openings. These measures will also keep out cold air, making the home warmer and more energy efficient this winter.