

KISSING BUGS

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recently confirmed that blood-sucking “kissing bugs” have been found in more than 28 states, but what exactly are they?



What Is a “Kissing Bug”?

The “kissing bug” is a triatomine, which is a type of reduviid bug that can carry *Trypanosoma cruzi*, the parasite that causes Chagas disease.

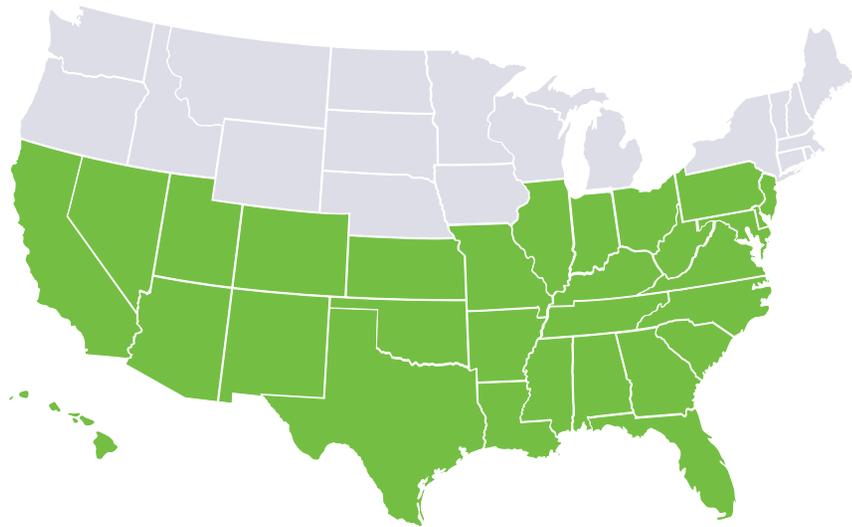
They feed on blood during the night. They are called kissing bugs, because they prefer to bite humans around the mouth or eyes.

What Do Kissing Bugs Look Like?

Adult kissing bugs are somewhat larger than a penny, ranging from

about 0.75 to 1.25 inches in length. Their heads are cone-shaped, and their legs are long and thin. Unlike some other species, the legs are uniformly thin along the length of the leg, and there are no “bulging” thicker areas. They have distinctive mouthparts that appear as a large black extension to the head. All kissing bugs are dark brown and/or black; and many have orange/red stripes or solid orange/light brown around the outside part of their bodies.

Kissing bug bites can lead to transmission of a potentially fatal



Kissing bugs are found across the southern US. All the green states have at least one report of kissing bugs.

parasite. While the insect sucks your blood, it defecates. In its feces is a parasite that finds a home in your tissue, muscles and heart.

What Are the Symptoms of Being Bitten by a Kissing Bug?

If a person contracts Chagas disease by being bitten by a kissing bug, the symptoms typically include severe redness, itching, swelling, welts and hives, CDC officials say. There are two phases of the disease.

Allergic Reaction

An allergic reaction such as Romaña’s sign, the swelling of

the child’s eyelid, is a marker of acute Chagas disease. Swelling is due to *Trypanosoma cruzi* infecting the eyelid when bug feces are accidentally rubbed into the eye, or because the bite wound was on the same side of the child’s face as the swelling.

Other Early Symptoms

During the acute phase of Chagas disease, which lasts for the first few weeks or months of infection, a person may have no symptoms or mild ones, such as:

- Fever
- Fatigue
- Body aches
- Headache

- Rash
- Loss of appetite
- Diarrhea
- Vomiting
- Mild enlargement of the liver or spleen
- Swollen glands

Because these symptoms are similar to those of other illnesses, most people do not know their illness is from infection with the *T. cruzi* parasite. A blood test can determine whether you have Chagas disease, and if you are found to have Chagas disease, you may be referred to a specialist for heart testing and treatment.

Chronic Complications of Chagas Disease

During the chronic phase, which can last for decades or even for the entirety of someone’s lifetime, most people have no symptoms.

However, approximately 20–30 percent of infected people develop severe complications, including:

- Cardiac complications, which can include an enlarged heart, heart failure, altered heart rate or rhythm, and cardiac arrest (sudden death)
- Gastrointestinal complications, which

- can include an enlarged esophagus (megaesophagus) or colon (megacolon) and can lead to difficulties with eating
- Increased risk of stroke

The CDC estimates that at least 300,000 persons with an infection from *T. cruzi* parasite are living in the United States.

What to Do If You Think You Have Chagas Disease

If you are concerned that you may have been bitten by a kissing bug and contracted Chagas disease, you should discuss your concerns with your healthcare provider. Chagas disease is diagnosed by blood tests. You might be referred to a specialist for heart monitoring and for treatment.

Pregnant mothers who think they may be infected should see their OBGYN for testing. The risk of an infected mother spreading Chagas disease to an unborn child is less than 1 in 10.

How Do You Protect Yourself from Chagas Disease?

Kissing bugs have been found across the southern United States, as well as in Indiana and Illinois. Triatomines often come

out at night and are attracted to lights, and they can be found outdoors around wood piles and debris in the yard, beneath porches, in spaces under cracked cement. They are most active from May to October, when the weather is warmer.

The CDC recommends locating outdoor lights away from dwellings such as homes, dog kennels and chicken coops and turning off lights that are not in use. Other precautions to prevent house infestation from kissing bugs include the following:

- Sealing cracks and gaps around windows, walls, roofs and doors
- Removing wood, brush and rock piles near your house
- Using screens on doors and windows
- Sealing holes and cracks leading to the attic, crawl spaces below the house and outside
- Having pets sleep indoors
- Close chimney flues when not in use
- Keeping your house and any outdoor pet resting areas clean, in addition to periodically checking both areas for the presence of bugs

If you suspect you find a kissing bug do not touch or squash it, as

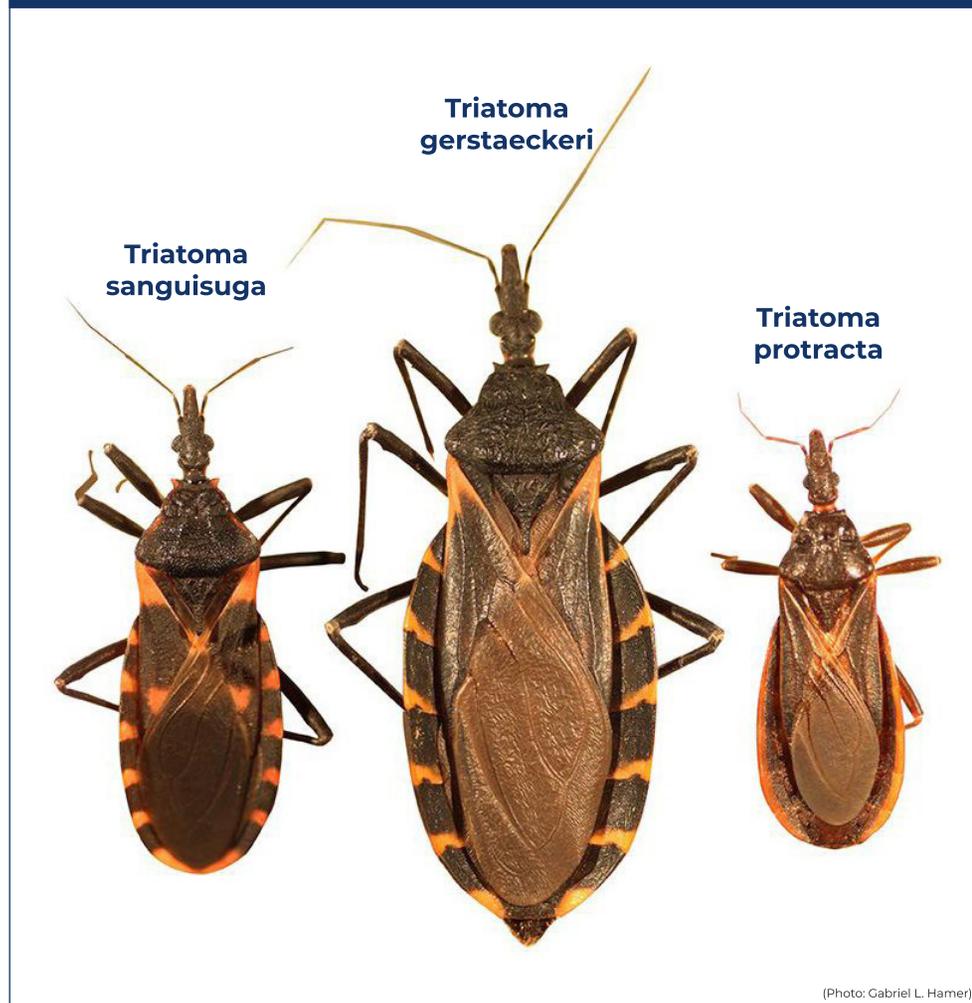
the body may be contaminated with the virus. Place a container on top of the bug, slide the bug inside, and fill it with rubbing alcohol or, if not available, freeze the bug in the container. Then, you may take the container with the suspected kissing bug to your local extension service,

health department or a university laboratory for identification.

Any surfaces that may have come into contact with the bug should be cleaned with a solution made of 1 part bleach to 9 parts water (or 7 parts ethanol to 3 parts water).

SOURCE:
Centers for Disease Control
and Prevention

THREE SPECIES OF KISSING BUGS FOUND IN THE U.S.



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