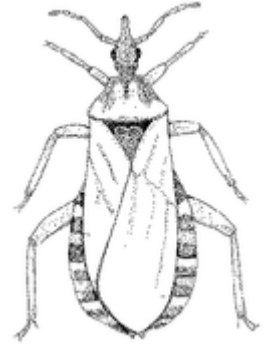


## Don't Get Kissed by a Kissing Bug

Just this week I spoke with a Foothill resident who was bitten by a kissing bug while in his bed. Within a few hours he found himself in the emergency room at the hospital. Conenose bugs are commonly called assassin bugs. Most members of this family are predators of other insects, but the conenose bugs (also known as kissing bugs), are bloodsucking parasites of a wide variety of domestic and wild animals and humans. In California these bugs are most prevalent in the foothill areas surrounding the Central Valley.



The western bloodsucking conenose frequently lives in aggregations in the nests of wood rats, but also flies into homes and may feed on people. Although not usually painful, bites from conenose bugs sometimes produce allergic reactions, which can be cause for concern in sensitive individuals. The adult western bloodsucking conenose is 1/2 to 3/4 inch long, dark brown to black in color, and has a lateral abdominal margin that is sometimes tan. The wings are held flat over the back at rest. The head has four-segmented antennae, conspicuous eyes, and a three-segmented, straight beak that extends backward below the body. Eggs are usually laid in summer and hatch in 3 to 5 weeks, giving rise to the first of five nymphal stages, each requiring a blood meal before molting to the next stage. Each blood meal can last 20 to 30 minutes and then takes 1 week to digest. In homes likely places for them to spend the day are in cracks or crevices around doors and window screens, in bedding or mattresses, in furniture, closets, and other dimly lit locations. Outside they can often be found in animal nests and nesting material.

Typically, bites from conenose bugs occur at night; victims are bitten in their sleep and may find the engorged bugs in their beds. Usually there are several punctures about 1/4 inch apart along a straight line primarily on the torso; the bite is initially painless but may swell and cause a substantial welt that itches for several days. Fifty percent of those bitten react more severely the second time, with symptoms ranging from welts that itch to swelling of the tongue, larynx, and trachea. If you suspect you or a family member might be allergic or is developing an allergy to conenose bug bites, go to a physician or allergist for testing and to find out about the availability of a desensitization program of antigen injections. Research has shown that about 7% of people tested in areas where conenose bugs are common have the potential for developing serious immediate-sensitivity reactions, including anaphylactic shock, to the bite of this insect. Antihistamines potentially have value combating non-life-threatening reactions, but should be used according to a physician's instructions.

Various measures can be taken to prevent problems caused by this pest. These include removing likely harborage and sealing points of entry. Fix structural problems in buildings that permit the bug's entry. Use weather stripping, caulk, or silicone seal to eliminate small cracks and crevices. Screen all windows and vent openings. Keep fireplace flues shut. Make sure that dog and cat entrances are insect proof. Since lights attract the insects at night, move them away from doors and windows. Remove ground squirrel, wood rat, and other rodent nests within 300 feet of the house. Check beds at night and shake out the bedding before getting into bed.

This article adapted from Cooperative State Research, Education and Extension Service, USDA. Please contact Ken Churches at [cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu](mailto:cdcalaveras@ucdavis.edu) or (209) 754-6475 with your agricultural questions. To speak with a Certified Master Gardener: Calaveras (209) 754-2880, Tuolumne (209) 533-5696, Amador (209) 223-6837, El Dorado (530) 621-5543.