Avoiding Summer Skin Problems
By: Dr. Alexandra Caracitas

Summer is in full swing and hopefully your fun hasn’t been jeopardized by anything that causes itchiness, redness or swelling. There are a few summer-specific skin conditions or, as they are known to physicians, "summer dermatoses," that we should all keep on our radar.

Of course, the most common summer skin ailment is sunburn. It is important to stay protected and use a sunscreen with a UV rating of at least 30, but there are a few other heat-related skin issues that you might not be thinking about, but should be.

Contracting poison ivy or poison oak can really put a damper on a day in the great outdoors. The medical name for these issues is contact dermatitis, which refers to any condition that occurs when touching something leads to a rash or allergic reaction on the skin’s surface. Contact dermatitis causes itchiness and redness. Severe cases can cause blisters, hives or swelling.

The best way to prevent contact dermatitis is to be hyper aware of your surroundings. Google what poison ivy and poison oak look like. Be careful when camping, hiking or walking. Avoid tall grasses and stick to the paths. Treat these contact issues with over-the-counter hydrocortisone, but if the rash is more severe you may need a prescription strength steroid from your own dermatologist or family physician.

Bug bites are annoying and can also lead to more serious health issues like Lyme disease or West Nile virus. Scratching a bug bite until it bleeds can lead to infection.

A bug’s decision-making process to bite or not bite is more complicated than you might think. Carbon dioxide production, and the lipid mix on the surface of the skin, are what attract bugs to humans. Mosquitoes find humans by determining where carbon dioxide is being produced. As humans, producing carbon dioxide is pretty much unavoidable (we can’t exactly stop breathing to prevent a mosquito bite). Each person’s lipid mixture is a bit more varied. Everyone has a different composition of lipids on the surface of the skin, made up of cholesterol, triglycerides, ceramides and other fats. Certain lipid mixtures are more appealing to bugs. This is why it is common for some people to get bitten more than others.

Unfortunately, your skin’s lipid mix is based on genetics. You can’t change your DNA, but there are some preventative measures that everyone can take to avoid summer bites. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends using bug repellents that contain DEET, picardin or oil of lemon eucalyptus. Sleep inside or in a screened-in area like a tent. If you have a bug bite that is unusually itchy or feels painful, contact your family physician or dermatologist.

If you live in workout clothes or spandex, you could be at risk for developing folliculitis. It is particularly easy to contract this bacterial infection in the summer months. Bacteria thrive in warm, moist dark conditions, like sweaty t-shirts or damp bathing suits. Folliculitis looks like red bumps or pustules and is commonly found on shoulders, thighs and bottoms. Folliculitis can be itchy or burn. Folliculitis can also be contracted in hot tubs. Be sure that every hot tub you spend time in is properly chlorinated.

If you are sweaty, rinse off. Change out of tight clothes after exercising and try not to wear spandex all day. If you plan to be out for the whole day and it is very humid, bring a change of clothes. An antibacterial cleanser can help prevent and treat folliculitis. If you notice something that looks like folliculitis, contact your family physician or dermatologist. More severe cases require an oral antibiotic.

Dr. Alexandra Caracitas is a board-certified family medicine physician, enabling her to diagnose and treat most illnesses and medical conditions for the whole family. Her office is located in Raritan Bay Medical Center’s Medical Pavilion at Perth Amboy, 516 Lawrie St. She accepts most medical insurances, is accepting new patients and speaks fluent Portuguese and Spanish. Saturday appointments are available, call 732-324-4860.