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I'm going to a malarial zone but I'm allergic to insect repellents

DR THOMAS STUTTAFORD

A 49-year-old woman has written to tell us that her husband is giving her a holiday in Kenya to celebrate her birthday. Although appreciative of the kindly thought, she is worried because insects seem to be attracted to her — and when she last went to a malarial zone she found that she was allergic to DEET. Which anti-malarials and repellents should she use?

Unfortunately the reader hasn't told us when she is going but she should bear in mind that the pattern of resistance to anti-malarial drugs is constantly changing and so she should check with a travel health clinic before she packs her bags.

The first precaution to take against malaria is to avoid mosquitoes. No antimalarial is 100 per cent reliable.

DEET (diethyltoluamide) is the repellent of choice. I am interested in the reader's apparent sensitivity to DEET. The occasional case of hypersensitivity, of a generalised allergy or even anaphylactic shock, to DEET have been reported, but usually the skin troubles are a local sensitivity to it rather than an allergic response. There is, therefore, sometimes a need to avoid applying it to soft skin such as is found under the arms, behind the knees, in the elbow, around the genitalia, near the eyes or lips. It may well be that if the reader avoids applying DEET to these sensitive sites all will be well.

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