

Insect Bites and Stings

Every year, thousands of calls are made to the Poison Center regarding insect bite information or treatment advice. While all insects can bite or sting, some are more bothersome and dangerous than others. Bites from fleas, mosquitoes and the common horsefly can cause pain, itching and swelling at the site – an unpleasant experience but not necessarily dangerous, unless an infection occurs.

What is the immediate treatment for bites or stings?

If breathing difficulties, swallowing and/or body-wide itching develop, the patient is having a severe allergic reaction. Immediately call 9-1-1 for assistance. Otherwise, wash the bite or sting area well with soap and water to help prevent infection.

If stung or bitten on fingers or hand, remove any rings or jewelry in case of swelling. Your local pharmacist can help you select the best over-the-counter medications to help treat insect and spider bites.

How can stings and bites be prevented?

- Do not leave food, drinks or garbage out and uncovered. Many bees and wasps are attracted to the odor or rotting food.
- Bees are also attracted to the smell of fruit juices, soda pop, leather and perspiration.
- Avoid wearing perfumes and other floral scents (so you don't smell like a flower).
- Avoid wearing bright floral patterned clothes (so you don't look like a flower).
- Do not walk barefoot.
- Do not plant shrubs or flowers that attract bees, such as star jasmine or bottle brush, next to swimming pools, decks or patios.
- Shake all shoes, clothing, towels and bedding that have been sitting around. Insects and scorpions may crawl into the folds to hide.
- Wear a Medic-Alert bracelet if extremely allergic to bee or wasp stings.
- If you are allergic, ask your physician about prescribing an emergency bee-sting kit to have on hand.

Bees, Hornets, Wasps

Stings from bees, hornets and wasps cause more deaths than bites and stings from all other insects and spiders. Death is usually a result of an allergic reaction.

Honey bees are the only stinging insects that leave a stinger in the wound. Other bees can sting repeatedly. If stung by a bee, check the wound to see if the stinger is still there. The stinger will be clearly visible. If the stinger is still there, scrape or flick it out with something stiff like a credit card. Do not try to pull the stinger out as squeezing injects more venom into the wound. Usual symptoms include a burning pain and swelling.

Mosquitoes

When a mosquito bites, it produces saliva that is irritating when injecting into the wound. Mosquito bites cause pain, redness, swelling and itching. Frequently a small blister or hive develops at the bite site. Allergy to mosquito bites is common.

Some people seem to be much more attractive to mosquitoes than others. Sensitive people can get covered with bites while others may get only one or two bites. If mosquitoes find you to be particularly tasty, wear insect repellent before venturing into mosquito country.

To reduce the mosquito population in your yard, look for any standing water that mosquitoes could use to breed. This might include watering cans, the dog's water dish, a wading pool, a birdbath, a tire, a tin can, wheelbarrows, saucers under potted plants or anywhere that can collect water. It doesn't take a lot of water to grow a lot of mosquitoes.

Spider Bites

There are at least 50,000 spider species in the arachnid family. Spiders are defined as having eight jointed legs, no wings, no antennae and only two body sections: the thorax and the abdomen. Spiders spend their entire life span capturing and eating other insects (about 2,000 a year). Even though spiders do a great deal of good for our environment, spiders are greatly feared by most of the population. Most spiders are killed only because they scare people, not because they are actually dangerous to humans.

All spiders have some amount of venom with varying degrees of potency. The fangs of a spider are hollow. The venom is injected through the fangs into the victim (usually an insect). The venom will rapidly paralyze the victim and aid in digestion. Fortunately, most spiders are not dangerous to humans because their fangs are either too short or too fragile to penetrate human skin.

Spiders do not attack in herds. Spiders do not lay in wait and attack people. Spiders do not lift the covers at night and crawl into bed to bite people as they are sleeping. Some spiders can jump but they are not intentionally jumping at humans to attack them. A spider generally bites a human because it was scared and bites to defend itself. Spiders generally prefer to live in undisturbed areas such as corners of the house or the eaves or in the garden where they can catch insects in peace.

Bite marks from most spiders are usually too small to easily be seen. Frequently the patient will not recall being bitten. Many of the spider bites will result in pain, small puncture wounds, redness, itching and swelling that lasts a couple of days. Spiders rarely bite more than once, so multiple bites are usually caused by insects such as fleas, bedbugs, ticks, mites and biting flies.

How are these bites treated?

Frequently, when people with spider bites call the Poison Center, they think there is some special treatment that is necessary for their bite. There is no specialized therapy other than treating the symptoms. Most importantly, keep the wound clean to prevent infection. If the wound does not heal or does develop an infection, see your physician. Do not wait days and weeks while the wound continues to get worse.