

Insect Bites and Stings

What is it?

A bite or sting from any insect.

Most insect bites and stings are mild and can be treated at home. They might cause itching, swelling and stinging that go away in a day or two. Some bites or stings can transmit disease-causing bacteria, viruses or parasites. Stings from bees, yellow jackets, wasps, hornets and fire ants might cause a severe allergic reaction (anaphylaxis).

Plan of Action:

Mild reactions:

- Move to a safe area to avoid more bites or stings.
- Remove any stingers.
- Gently wash the area with soap and water.
- Apply a cloth dampened with cold water or filled with ice to the area of the bite or sting for 10 to 20 minutes. This helps reduce pain and swelling.
- If the injury is on an arm or leg, raise it.
- Apply to the affected area calamine lotion, baking soda paste, or 0.5% or 1% hydrocortisone cream. Do this several times a day until your symptoms go away.
- Take an anti-itch medicine (antihistamine) by mouth to reduce itching. Options include nonprescription cetirizine, fexofenadine (Allegra Allergy), loratadine (Claritin).
- Take a nonprescription pain reliever as needed.

Seek medical care if the swelling gets worse, the site shows signs of infection, or you don't feel well.

When to seek emergency care:

Call 911 or your local medical emergency number if anyone is having a serious reaction that suggests anaphylaxis, even if it's just one or two signs or symptoms:

- Trouble breathing
- Swelling of the lips, face, eyelids, or throat
- Dizziness, fainting, or unconsciousness
- A weak and rapid pulse
- Hives
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhea

Take these actions immediately while waiting for medical help:

- Ask whether the injured person is carrying an epinephrine autoinjector (EpiPen, Auvi-Q, others).
- If yes, ask whether you should help inject the medication. This is usually done by pressing the autoinjector against the thigh and holding it in place for several seconds.
- Loosen tight clothing and cover the person with a blanket.
- Don't offer anything to drink.
- If needed, position the person to prevent choking on vomit.