Insect bites and stings

Here are some common types of bites and stings, tips on how to avoid them, symptoms, potential complications and the best treatments.

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Common types of bites and stings
In the UK, common biting insects include various types of flies, horseflies, fleas, midges, mites, gnats and mosquitoes. When an insect bites you, it makes a tiny hole in your skin so it can feed on your blood.
Common stinging insects include bumblebees, honeybees, hornets and wasps. When you are stung, an insect punctures your skin and injects venom. In some cases the venom can cause a serious allergic reaction.

Prevention: help to avoid bites and stings
Prevention is always better than cure and a few simple steps can help reduce your risk of a painful encounter with an insect:
Apply insect repellent containing diethyltoluamide (DEET) to exposed areas of skin when going outside
Avoid using perfumes, soaps, shampoos and deodorants with strong fragrances, which can attract insects
Always wear shoes outdoors and use gloves for gardening
Wear long sleeves and trousers at times when insects are particularly active, such as sunrise and sunset
Keep food and drink (especially sweet things) covered outside and pour drinks into a cup or glass rather than drinking from bottles and cans
Wash your hands after handling sticky or sweet food or drink
Avoid picking fruit from the ground or from trees and stay away from flowering plants
Avoid rubbish and compost areas and keep a lid on your dustbin
Avoid camping near ponds or swamps where mosquitoes and horseflies are found
Move away slowly without panicking or waving your arms if you encounter wasps, hornets or bees. Never disturb insect nests and contact pest control professionals if you find one in your home.

Symptoms of a bite or sting
An insect bite or sting often causes a small lump, which can be extremely itchy and red and swollen. It may be filled with fluid, in which case it’s called a weal.
When you are stung, you’ll usually feel an intense, burning pain, quickly followed by the development of a red, swollen patch. This generally eases within a few hours.

You may not notice immediately when an insect bites you (although horsefly bites are an exception and can be very painful). Sometimes the insect’s saliva causes irritation and an itchy lump can develop up to 24 hours after a bite. In other cases a weal may develop quickly and last for about two hours before being followed by an itchy, solid lump up to 24 hours later. This can last for several days.

**Spotting an allergic reaction**

Severe symptoms after an insect bite or sting are not common but do occur in some people. Allergic reactions are more common from stings. Some people may experience a large localised reaction (LLR), when an area up to 30cm (12 inches) across or even a whole arm or leg may become swollen. You might experience a rash, nausea and painful or swollen giants but it’s not dangerous unless the swelling interferes with your airways. If you have been bitten or stung many times, your symptoms will be more severe. The swelling is likely to last more than 48 hours but should go down after a few days.

A systemic reaction (SR) often requires immediate medical attention as it can cause potentially life-threatening anaphylaxis, a whole body allergic reaction. You are more likely to have an SR if you have been bitten or stung before (especially recently) by the same insect, as this makes you sensitised. An SR is more likely in people who have been sensitised to bee stings than those stung by wasps.

NHS Choices recommends that if you have any of the following symptoms after being bitten or stung you should call 999 immediately:

- Wheezing, hoarseness or difficulty breathing;
- Nausea, vomiting or diarrhoea;
- Dizziness or feeling faint;
- A fast heart rate;
- Difficulty swallowing;
- A swollen face or mouth;
- Confusion, anxiety or agitation.

**Treatment: dealing with bites and stings**

Most bites and stings can be treated at home. With bee stings, it’s necessary to remove the sting and a venomous sac, which is often left in the skin. You can scrape it out with a fingernail or using something with a hard edge like a bankcard. Don’t punch the sting out with your fingers or tweezers because you may spread the venom. Wasps and hornets don’t usually leave the sting behind, but this means they can sting you again so walk away calmly.

Bites and stings can be treated by washing the area with soap and water and placing a flannel or cloth cooled with cold water on the area to reduce swelling. Don’t scratch the area because this risks causing an infection. If the area is causing irritation you might also:

- Wrap an ice pack in a towel and place it on the swelling
- Take paracetamol or ibuprofen (but don’t give aspirin to children under 16)
- Use a spray or cream containing local anaesthetic, hydrocortisone or antihistamine on the affected area or take an antihistamine tablet.

If symptoms get worse or don’t clear up after a few days, see your GP. A GP may prescribe a short course of oral corticosteroids for severe swelling or prescribe an adrenaline pen and show you how to use it if you had an allergic reaction.

**Natural remedies and household solutions**

A host of other remedies have been suggested over the years as potential treatments. Experts say there’s no research to prove these remedies are effective.
but they can’t do any harm, although rubbing banana peel, lemon or lime on a bite or sting is definitely best avoided as the smell could attract more insects. The same goes for honey, despite it containing antibacterial elements. Tea tree oil has antiseptic properties, meaning it can help prevent infection. Aloe vera and basil leaves both have anti-inflammatory qualities to fight itching and swelling. Some people swear by dabbing wasp stings – which are alkali – with vinegar, and using a paste made from baking soda and water to deal with the acidity in bee stings.