

Insect bites and stings: First aid

Most insect bites and stings are mild and can be treated at work. 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).

When seeking emergency help

Call 911 or your local medical emergency number if stung by a scorpion or if anyone is having a serious reaction that suggests anaphylaxis, even if it's just one or two of the following 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.
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Take these actions immediately while waiting for medical help:

- Ask whether the injured person is carrying an epinephrine autoinjector (Auvi-Q, others). Ask whether you should help inject the medicine. 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

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Treatment

To treat a mild reaction to an insect bite or sting:

- Move to a safe area to avoid more bites or stings.
- Remove any stingers.
- Gently wash the area with soap and water.
- Apply to the affected skin a cloth dampened with cold water or filled with ice. Keep it on 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 skin 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 by mouth to reduce itching. Options include nonprescription cetirizine, fexofenadine (Allegra Allergy, Children's Allegra Allergy), loratadine (Claritin). These types of medicines are also called antihistamines.
- Take a nonprescription pain reliever as needed.

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When to call your doctor

See a healthcare professional if the swelling gets worse, the site shows signs of infection, or you don't feel well.

