

BITES & STINGS

TO YOUR HEALTH - PATIENT EDUCATION HANDOUT

6.5

DESCRIPTION

Skin eruptions and other symptoms caused by insect or arachnid (spider) bites or stings. The victim may not remember being bitten or stung.

FREQUENT SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

- Red lumps in the skin. The lumps usually appear within minutes after the bite or sting, but some don't appear for six to twelve hours later.
- Pain from bite or sting
- Itching due to the body's release of histamine at the bite site.
- Presence of stinger at site of sting
- Nausea or vomiting
- Headache
- Fever
- Dizziness; light headedness
- Swelling
- Convulsions
- Difficulty swallowing
- Generalized itching
- Itching eyes
- Facial flushing
- Dry cough; wheezing
- Difficulty breathing (anaphylactic symptoms)

CAUSES

The bite or sting causes an injection of venom into the skin; this starts a reaction from the body's immune system. The reaction may be mild to severe, depending on how sensitive a person is to the toxin.

RISK INCREASES WITH

- Areas with heavy insect or arachnid (spider) infestations
- Warm weather in spring and summer
- Lack of protective measures (clothing and insect repellent)
- Use of perfumes or colognes

PREVENTIVE MEASURES

- If you cannot avoid exposure, apply repellents with diethyltoluamide (DEET) to the skin.
- Wear protective clothing in which permethrin has been applied to repel insects and ticks.
- Be cautious when reaching in dark areas or removing debris.
- Cover food and drinks when outdoors to avoid accidental swallowing.

EXPECTED OUTCOME

Most troublesome symptoms disappear in 2 to 3 days, but scratching may prolong symptoms for several weeks. Treatment helps, but it doesn't cure quickly.

POSSIBLE COMPLICATIONS

- Anaphylaxis (life-threatening allergic reaction) for hypersensitive persons).
- Secondary bacterial infection at the site of the bite.
- Scarring
- Disorders caused by certain insects, such as lyme disease, rocky mountain spotted fever, west nile disease, and malaria.

GENERAL MEASURES

- For severe reactions to a bite or sting, get emergency help right away as they can be life-threatening. For most bites and stings, self-care is usually all that is needed.
- Remove stinger by scraping it out. Don't use tweezers.
- For bee, wasp, yellow-jacket, or hornet stings, apply ice.
- For ant bites, use a cold compress.
- For spider or scorpion bites, capture the arachnid, if possible, and seek medical help.
- For a tick, use a tweezer to remove it. Put it in a jar with alcohol to kill it. Save it in case medical problems develop.
- Clean the wound with soap and water. Apply an ice pack.
- Elevate and rest the affected body part.
- Warm-water soaks help soothe minor pain. Cool-water soaks feel better for itching.
- If you have had anaphylaxis (severe allergic reaction) following a bite or sting, your health care provider can prescribe an emergency kit for you to carry.

MEDICATION

For minor discomfort, you may use:

- Non-prescription oral antihistamines to decrease itching.
- Nonprescription topical steroid drugs to reduce redness and swelling and to decrease itching. For face and groin, use only low-potency steroid products without fluorine.

For serious symptoms, you may be prescribed:

- Stronger topical steroids or oral steroids if the reaction is severe.
- Injection of drugs may be needed to prevent or reduce symptoms of anaphylaxis.
- A tetanus shot, if needed.

NOTIFY OUR OFFICE IF...

- You have symptoms of anaphylaxis. Call 911, this is an emergency!
- Self-care does not relieve symptoms, or symptoms don't improve after 2 to 3 days of medical treatment.
- A bitten area becomes red, swollen, warm and tender, or draining indicating infection.
- Fever rises to 101°F (38.3°C).



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This information is for educational purposes only. Consult your doctor for specific medical advice, diagnosis and treatment.

618-453-3311

Dial-A-Nurse is available after-hours until 10:30 p.m. during fall and spring semesters. In case of emergency dial 911.