

# Insect stings and bites

**You have been treated in the Emergency Department following an insect sting or bite. This leaflet gives you advice on how to care for this at home.**

## About insect stings / bites

Most stings from bees, wasps and hornets cause slight swelling and have little other effect. However, some people are allergic to stings and their reaction can be life-threatening. Insect bites rarely cause a serious systemic allergic reaction, but can commonly cause localised redness and itchy lumps on the skin.

- Insects that sting include: wasps, bees and hornets.
- Insects that bite include: midges, gnats, mosquitoes, horseflies, fleas, mites, ticks and bedbugs.

## Symptoms of a generalised (systemic) allergic reaction

The toxin can cause the immune system to react strongly. This can cause:

- Itchy skin, followed by an itchy blotchy rash that can develop anywhere on the body.
- Swelling of the face / lips / tongue / upper airway.
- Difficulty in breathing / wheezing.
- Low blood pressure, which can cause you to feel faint or cause you to collapse.
- Fast heart rate.
- Severe difficulty in breathing / collapse – anaphylaxis.

**This is an emergency and an ambulance should be called immediately.**

## Symptoms of a localised skin reaction

Local skin reactions caused by insects can cause:

- Irritation and an itch over the site of the bite.
- An itchy lump (papule) can develop 24 hours after the bite with inflammation / redness to the surrounding skin.
- An itchy raised mark on the skin (a weal).

## Treatment of a localised skin reaction:

- Painkillers, such as paracetamol and ibuprofen, can help reduce the pain.
- Antihistamines, such as piriton (available at pharmacies). Always follow the manufacturer's instructions regarding the correct dose and as to whether there are any reasons why you cannot take the antihistamine medicine.
- Cold compresses can reduce the swelling and the pain. Use a cold flannel or an ice pack wrapped in a towel.

## Symptoms of a localised allergic skin reaction

Some people have an allergic reaction to the toxin in the sting. This causes localised swelling that increases and becomes larger over several hours and can extend up to an entire limb. In severe cases it can affect your airway or cause the skin to blister.

## **Treatment of localised allergic skin reaction:**

- Crotamiton cream (brand name – Eurax, available at pharmacies) can help soothe the itchy skin.
- Steroidal cream, such as hydrocortisone cream (available at pharmacies) can relieve the pain and swelling and irritation caused by the sting / bite.
- Antihistamines (follow the manufacturer’s instructions).

## **Skin infections**

A skin infection can develop following a sting or bite, particularly if you scratch it a lot, causing damage to the skin and allowing bacteria to enter. Symptoms of a skin infection include pain and swelling around the bite or sting, and spreading redness and sometimes fever. **A skin infection can become serious if not treated.**

## **Treatment of a skin infection following a sting or bite**

Antibiotics may be needed if a bite or sting becomes infected.

## **Infestations**

If you are having recurrent insect bites, you should try to identify the source of the infestation. It may be that your pet, house or soft furnishings need treating with an insecticide. Contact your vet or local pest control company for advice, depending on the cause of the stings or bites.

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**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

K O’Hagan, Lead Advanced Practitioner, Emergency Department, June 2023.

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