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# News

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\*\* Part IV: Bites and Stings -- keep insects and animals from bugging you.

## BITES AND STINGS

DALLAS—Coping with creatures of other species during the summer can be a major undertaking. Insects invade our homes and gardens. And snakes share our lakes and wilderness areas. Knowing prevention can keep you from being bugged, and practicing proper first aid can ward off the sting of a medical bill.

### Bees

Unless a victim has a prior history of severe allergic reactions to bee stings, an ice pack, cold wash and oral antihistamine will lessen the swelling and pain, said Dr. John Weigelt, assistant professor of Surgery at The University of Texas Health Science Center at Dallas.

In addition, the person should elevate the area to decrease the swelling of a local reaction, said Dr. Barbara Stark, fellow in the Allergy and Immunology Division of the Internal Medicine Department at UTHSCD. The bee is the only insect that leaves its stinger in its victim. The barbed stinger should be carefully removed with tweezers so as not to break the tiny venom sac that contains the poison, she said.

If a person has had a previous serious reaction to an insect or bee sting and has not been desensitized by an allergist, then he or she should carry epinephrine, a drug used to combat allergic reactions. If stung, that person should be taken to an emergency room immediately since reactions to stings can be life-threatening. Telltale symptoms of severity include fainting or light-headedness, flushing, breathing trouble, itchy palms or feet and hives. Usually the symptoms appear within one hour after attack. Persons with heart trouble, asthma, other allergies or those on beta blocking drugs may be predisposed to having a severe reaction, said Stark.

Epinephrine is available by prescription and comes in convenient containers. The victim can immediately give himself a shot into the thigh area to prevent reaction, she said. The drug is the same as adrenaline, and side effects include nausea, palpitations and jitters. It is not advisable to let the victim drive. The shot, however, does not replace medical care and the victim should be taken to an emergency room immediately.

### Scorpions

Scorpion bites, said Weigelt, are usually not so dangerous as bee stings.

An over-the-counter antihistamine can help relieve itching and pain, and ice or a cold compress can be applied to the bite.

If a person has previous allergic reactions or shows signs of illness, transport him or her to the nearest emergency room.

### Fire Ants

An extremely aggressive type of ant, the fire ant's sting can be painful. These large red



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ants attack as a group and often grab hold of their victim's skin, swinging their bodies around in a circle stinging repeatedly, explained Stark.

Use extreme caution not to break the tiny blisters, wash the bite area well with antiseptic or plain soap and bandage. Care should be taken to prevent secondary infection. Although the bite is not particularly painful or itchy, a baking soda paste may help remove some of the sting and a mild pain reliever can also be given. The lesions should heal within a week.

#### Brown Recluse Spider

These spiders are commonly found in trees or bushes and bite victims around the head or shoulders as they walk under the tree or on extremities as they brush against vegetation. They can be identified by the fiddle-shaped mark on the top of their head.

Often, said Weigelt, the victim doesn't know they have been bitten until symptoms appear.

The bite resembles a mosquito bite but has a dark brown spot in the center. The spot may grow to be from a quarter to a half-dollar size and may be evident for up to four weeks. It will eventually form a scab and fall off. It is extremely easy, stressed Weigelt, to get a secondary infection in such a bite and therefore it is important to keep the area clean. "There have been instances where a victim, not having taken care of the initial bite, will come to the emergency room with a terrible infection. They have much tissue loss and often require hospitalization, hydrotherapy and multiple skin grafts," he said.

Usually, says Weigelt, "we do not excise [cut away] the bite because to do so would likely cause worse scarring than the bite itself."

#### Black Widow Spider

If bitten by a black widow spider, the victim will experience intense pain at the site as well as systemic problems such as a very bad headache, abdominal pain and muscular spasms, said Weigelt. The venom causes hypertension and thus, such a bite is extremely dangerous for anyone with high blood pressure.

The victim should get to a major emergency room facility as soon as possible to be treated with antivenin.

This black spider has an orange-red hourglass marking on its abdomen. It avoids bright places and generally only bites if disturbed.

#### Animal Bites

The important aspect to keep in mind with animal bites, particularly dogs, is whether the bite was provoked or unprovoked.

The unprovoked attack is extremely rare, says Weigelt. Most often the dog perceives the victim as a threat and will attack to defend his territory. "A mother might bring her baby to the ER, upset and insisting the dog be destroyed because it attacked the baby when, in fact, the baby was crawling too close to the bowl while the dog was eating, and it saw the baby as a threat. We consider this a provoked attack," he said.

An unprovoked attack by a dog that is delirious can indicate rabies. Luckily, canine rabies has been nonexistent in the Dallas area for the last few years, and thus people's fear of getting rabies from dog bites is largely unfounded, said Weigelt.

The bite is extremely painful because of the enormous gripping power of a dog's jaws. Quite often the area, said Weigelt, will be badly bruised and swollen even though there may be little skin damage. If skin breakage is minor, the area should be cleaned with an antiseptic wash. In the emergency room, says Weigelt, a splint is usually applied to restrict movement,

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penicillin is given and the victim is asked to return in three to five days. Pain reliever or aspirin may be given at home.

Multiple bites or extensive skin wounds may require stitches and the victim should be taken to an emergency room for treatment immediately.

The dog should be closely observed. If it is rabid, it will be dead within 10 days after the attack. If the dog is unknown to the victim or the family, or if the victim is bitten by a wild animal, the dog pound should be notified.

If bitten by a wild animal such as a skunk, bat or raccoon, the victim should always go immediately to an emergency room.

#### Snakes

More than 90 percent of snake bites, said Stark, occur between March and October and during daylight hours. Of those bitten by snakes, only one in six are from venomous snakes. And 10-25 percent of those do not actually leave venom. One of the earliest (within two minutes) symptoms of envenomation, she said, is tingling tongue and lips, and a metallic, rubbery, or minty taste in the mouth. But, stressed Stark, any time someone is bitten by a snake, he or she should immediately go to a major medical center for evaluation. Smaller hospitals often do not have the antivenin necessary to treat snakebites.

If a person is more than 30 minutes from a hospital, a loose tourniquet can be applied four inches above the bite. Make sure two fingers will fit underneath the tourniquet and that the pulse can still be felt.

There will be pain and swelling around the bite and the victim may experience systemic problems such as headache and nausea.

It is imperative to keep the victim calm. Do not allow the victim to walk or drive and do not give any alcoholic beverages. Elevate the bite area slightly -- not higher than the heart -- and immediately seek medical help. Medical decisions necessary in the emergency center revolve around the need for antivenin. If antivenin is needed, the sooner it is given, the better the results, said Weigelt.

#### PREVENTION

--To prevent insect bites, wear neutral colored clothing. Any bright colors, such as orange or yellow, make you "look like a flower," said Stark and will attract insects.

--Perfumes, hair sprays, suntan lotion, some insect repellents and other scented cosmetics will attract flying insects. Repellents work best against mosquitoes, flies, ticks and chiggers. They may actually attract bees, wasps and yellow jackets.

--Almost all snake bites occur on the extremities--legs, feet, hands or arms. Gloves and boots or high leather shoes will protect most vulnerable areas from snake bites. The best rule is to never put your feet or hands anywhere you cannot see.

--Wear gloves while gardening and don't wear a scarf as flying insects may get stuck inside the scarf. Shoes or boots will also protect against insects.

--Know the insect's habitat and habits. Yellow jackets are attracted by food, wasps build their nests under the eaves of houses, bees usually live around trunks of trees. Black widow spiders seek out dark places in lumber piles, tree stumps and cracks in basements or houses. Snakes and scorpions are nocturnal and hide during the day under rocks, boards or other dark, protective places.

--To avoid animal bites, do not approach strange dogs or wild animals.

--In the event of an emergency involving any poison, call the North Central Texas Poison Center at Parkland Memorial Hospital. Their 24-hour hotline number is 920-2400.

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