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Bites, Stings and Other Irritating Things

By: Jeanette Valentin, M.D.

When warm weather arrives, many people jump at the chance to spend time outdoors. Trips to the swimming pool, summer barbeques and camping can all bring us into contact with nature. When it comes to love of the warm sun, bugs are no different than humans. They come out in droves when the weather is pleasant. Interaction with these pesky critters can lead to itchy bites and painful stings. Knowing how to avoid and treat bites and stings will help make outdoor fun both safe and enjoyable.

The body's reaction to bites and stings occurs in response to the injection of a bug's saliva or venom beneath the skin. Many bugs have no effect on the human body because their mouths are too small to penetrate the skin or their venom does not cause an allergic reaction. When a reaction does occur, its severity can range from harmless to life-threatening. Many bites can be easily treated with home remedies and over-the-counter medications, but it is important to recognize when a bite or sting requires medical attention.

Three usual suspects for irritating bites are mosquitoes, biting flies and ants. A typical mosquito bite causes an itchy, red lump that disappears within a few days. Mosquitoes are best avoided by wearing pants, long sleeves and applying insect repellent containing DEET, a safe and effective bug repellent. Biting flies include deerflies, blackflies and horseflies, and while it is more painful than that of the mosquito, their bite rarely causes an allergic reaction. Ant bites can be startlingly painful – especially when several ants bite simultaneously – and can result in a red lump that sometimes forms into a small collection of pus called a pustule. Biting flies and ants can be avoided simply by noting their location, keeping your distance and not disturbing them. In the case of biting flies, wearing bug repellent may also help.

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Jeanette Valentin, M.D.
Board Certified in Internal Medicine
Member of Medical Staff at Galesburg Cottage Hospital
834 N. Seminary Street, Suite 301
Galesburg, IL 61401
(309) 342-9183

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Spiders can also be responsible for painful and dangerous bites. The bites of many spiders result in relatively minor reactions that include redness and mild pain. However, two dangerous spiders common in North America are the Black Widow and Brown Recluse. The venomous female Black Widow is recognizable by its shiny black exterior and red hourglass shape on its stomach. The venom of a Black Widow is notoriously poisonous and anyone who thinks they may have been bitten by one should seek immediate medical attention. The Brown Recluse, named for its shy behavior, will bite only when it perceives danger. This spider is generally about 3/8" long and can be identified by its hairy, brown legs. Although less dangerous than the Black Widow, its bite can cause a large, painful wound that may require medical attention. Children, the elderly and those with weakened immune systems should be especially cautious of the Brown Recluse, as they are more likely to experience a serious reaction to its bite.

Bees, wasps and hornets are well-known for their painful stings. As opposed to a bite, a sting occurs when one of these flying bugs inserts a needle-like stinger located in its hind quarters into a person's skin. Most bees, wasps and hornets will not attack unless provoked. If approached, a person should remain calm, cover his or her face and slowly walk away. Running or swatting could startle the bug, making it more likely to attack. Do not kill a bee, wasp or hornet unless absolutely necessary because it can release a scent alarming others to attack.

The proper treatment of a bite or sting depends on the severity of the reaction – normal, local or life-threatening. A normal reaction consists of a small area of redness or swelling and a mild degree of pain and itching. In these cases, redness and swelling can be treated with a cold compress and pain can be treated with over-the-counter medications such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen. When swelling and redness spread to an entire arm, leg or other portion of the body and pain is significant, a local reaction has occurred. Seek medical attention if symptoms do not improve in several hours. These reactions are often treated with prescription medication. The medical term for a severe, potentially life-threatening allergic reaction is anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis is often marked by swelling of the mouth and throat, hives and severe itching and swelling throughout the body. An anaphylactic reaction is a medical emergency that requires immediate attention. People who have experienced this reaction in the past should speak with their physician about keeping an emergency dose of antihistamine on hand.

Time spent outdoors can be rewarding and enjoyable. Take the proper precautions to ensure that you and your family are able to make the most of the warm weather. Speak with your physician to learn more about how to recognize, avoid and treat potentially harmful bites and stings.

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