

Patient information: Insect bites and stings (The Basics)

Written by the doctors and editors at UpToDate

How are insect bites and stings different? — When an insect bites you, it uses its mouth parts. When an insect stings you, it uses a special “stinger” on the back of its body.

Biting insects usually bite other people and animals, too. When they bite you, they can transfer blood from their other victims to you. That means that they can infect you with the diseases their other victims have. Mosquitoes, for example, can carry a few infections. And certain types of ticks can infect you with the germ that causes Lyme disease.

Stinging insects, such as bees, wasps, and fire ants, do not usually carry disease. But stinging insects can inject you with venom that can irritate your skin. Plus, insect stings can be deadly to people who are severely allergic to the insect venom.

What should I do if I am stung by a bee, wasp, or fire ant? — If you are stung by a bee or wasp, quickly remove the stinger from your skin if it is still there. If you are stung by a fire ant, kill the ant with a slap as soon as you feel the sting.

Some people have a severe allergic reaction to insect stings called anaphylaxis. Call 9-1-1 for an ambulance if you suddenly:

- Have trouble breathing, become hoarse, or start wheezing (hearing a whistling sound when you breathe)
- Start to swell, especially around the face, eyelids, ears, mouth, hands, or feet
- Develop belly cramps, nausea, vomiting, or diarrhea
- Feel dizzy or pass out

What is a normal reaction to an insect sting? — Insect stings can cause the area around the sting to swell, turn red, hurt, and feel hot ([figure 1](#)).

To treat the pain and swelling around the area of the sting, you can:

- Wash the area with soap and cool water
- Keep the area clean and try not to scratch it
- Put a cold, damp washcloth on the area
- Take or apply anti-itch medicine
- Take a non-prescription pain medicine for the pain

What should I know about tick bites? — Ticks are found in the grass and on shrubs, and can attach to people walking by. One type of tick can spread Lyme disease. But a tick has to stay attached for a while before it can give you the infection. If you are bitten by a tick, gently remove the tick from your skin, using tweezers. If you can't remove a tick, see your doctor or nurse.

What can I do to reduce the chances of getting bitten or stung? — You can:

- Wear shoes, long-sleeved shirts, and long pants when you go outside. If you are worried about ticks, tuck your pants into your socks and wear light colors so you can spot any ticks that get on you.
- Wear bug spray
- Stay inside at dawn and dusk, when mosquitoes are most active
- Drain areas of standing water near your home, such as wading pools and buckets. Mosquitoes breed in standing water.
- Keep foods and drinks covered when you are outside
- If you see a stinging insect, stay calm and slowly back away
- If you live in an area that has fire ants, avoid stepping on ant mounds
- If you find an insect nest in or near your house, call a pest-control service to get rid of the nest safely