

Bites and Stings



Australia has a variety of tropical marine and land creatures that can cause serious bites and stings.

Although it is always best to seek medical advice where possible, it is also helpful to know some first-aid techniques that help. Bites can be from snakes, mosquitoes, midges (sandflies), spiders, ticks, or a variety of other insects. Stings can be caused by bees, wasps and marine creatures like shell or jellyfish.

Symptoms

Bites from insects, snakes or marine creatures can cause pain, stinging, itching and burning of the skin, and red bumps (swelling) and blisters. Intense itchiness may cause scratching, which can break the skin and may lead to an infection.

Some people experience severe allergic reactions (anaphylactic shock), to bites or stings, such as:

- having trouble breathing or talking
- tightness or swelling in the throat
- wheezing or coughing
- swollen tongue.

If a person is experiencing these symptoms, immediately seek urgent medical assistance.

If a person stops breathing, call for help straight away by dialling 000. Perform CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation) until medical help arrives.

Lifestyle options

You can minimise the chance of being bitten by mosquitoes or midges by:

- clearing any standing water around your house – throw away old containers and toys
- changing birdbaths once a week
- keeping grass trimmed
- getting screens on house windows and doors
- wearing long pants and long-sleeved shirts when outside, or walking in the bush
- using insect repellent on exposed skin.

Venomous bites and stings

Venomous snakes, funnel web spiders, blue ring octopus and cone shell snail bites are treated with pressure immobilisation as first aid, but this should not be used for other types of bites and stings. Pressure immobilisation aims to keep as much venom retained in the bite area as possible, and stop the lymphatic system from transporting it further into the bloodstream. Minimising all movement of the affected area will also slow the venom from spreading through the body. Do not use a tourniquet or attempt to suck out the venom.

- Apply a firm pressure bandage to the entire limb. Use an elastic bandage or clothing strips. Do not make the bandage too tight, as it should not cut off blood supply going to the limb.
- Use a splint as well, if available, or adapt items that are readily at hand like a stick. This will also assist immobilisation and prevent the venom moving around the body.
- Seek urgent medical assistance or call 000.

Jelly fish and stone fish

Irukandji and box jellyfish stings should be washed with vinegar.

Irukandji syndrome can develop about 30–40 minutes after being stung by Irukandji jellyfish. Symptoms include headache, overall body aches, chest and stomach pain, nausea, vomiting and breathing difficulties.

Stonefish stings should be washed with hot water (water that is only as hot as the person can tolerate).

Call 000 immediately if stung by stonefish, box jellyfish or Irukandji jellyfish.

Bluebottle jellyfish stings are not venomous but very painful. Wash sting with sea water then hot water (water that is only as hot as the person can tolerate). Apply ice, if no hot water is available. Do not apply ice directly on to the skin, rather wrap it in, for example, a thin cloth.

Bee stings can be removed by scraping the area with your finger nail, rather than brushing it off.

Red-back spider bites or wasp stings can be treated by washing the area with cool water and applying ice to help relieve pain. Do not apply ice directly on to the skin, rather wrap it in, for example, a thin cloth.

Ticks

Ticks are tiny insects that can burrow into your skin and feed on the blood. Some people have severe allergies to tick bites, which can be made worse on removal of the tick, so it is best not to attempt to remove them manually. If you have been bitten by a tick, it is best to remove it by using a special spray from the pharmacy that quickly freezes and kills it.

If you are allergic to ticks, bee or wasp stings carry emergency medicine (such as an EpiPen®) and a mobile phone, so you can call for assistance, with you at all times.

Pharmacy options

Always inform pharmacy staff if you are taking any other medicines, or if you have any other health conditions, because some over-the-counter medicines may not be suitable for you.

Medicines from the pharmacy can help relieve the discomfort from bites or stings. These are:

Antihistamines can help reduce the itching.

Hydrocortisone cream can reduce redness and inflammation.

Anaesthetic creams will numb the areas to relieve the pain.

Pharmacies can also supply a range of tropical strength water resistance insect repellants, ice-packs, and first-aid kits with bandages and creams. These are handy to keep in the house or take to the beach, travelling overseas or walking in the bush.

Ask your pharmacist for advice on the most suitable treatment for you.

See a doctor if:

- you are not sure what animal or insect caused the bite or the sting
- the discomfort, such as pain, itching, burning is getting worse
- your skin becomes broken, weeping or looks infected
- you feel dizzy, nauseous, or are sweating a lot.

More information

Health Direct: www.healthdirect.gov.au

Better Health Channel: www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au

Disclaimer: The information provided is a guide only, is current at time of publishing, and is not intended to replace the advice of your pharmacist or doctor.

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