

Insect bites and stings

Most insect bites and stings cause a small painful or itchy swelling and improve in a few days. Sometimes they cause a serious allergic reaction or become infected.

Call 999 now if there may be a serious allergic reaction

Warning signs can start quickly after a sting or bite.

- sudden swelling of the lips, mouth, tongue or throat
- fast or difficult breathing, wheezing, choking or gasping
- a tight throat, hoarse voice or difficulty swallowing
- sudden confusion, marked drowsiness, severe dizziness or fainting
- blue, grey or unusually pale lips or skin. On brown or black skin, check the palms and soles
- a child becoming limp, floppy or not responding normally

If an adrenaline auto-injector has been prescribed, use it immediately as trained. Call 999 and say 'anaphylaxis'. Lie flat and do not stand or walk. If breathing is difficult, sit up slowly with the legs stretched out. Use a second injector after 5 minutes if there is no improvement.

What to do now for a routine bite or sting

Start self-care promptly

- 1 Move away from the insect.** Stay calm and move slowly to avoid another sting.
- 2 Remove a visible stinger.** Brush or scrape it sideways with a fingernail or the edge of a card. Do not use tweezers or squeeze it.
- 3 Wash the area.** Use soap and water.
- 4 Cool the swelling.** Hold a wrapped ice pack or clean cold cloth on it for at least 20 minutes. Raise the area if you can.

Try not to scratch. Do not use bicarbonate of soda, vinegar or other home remedies.



Scrape sideways. Wash with soap and water. Cool for at least 20 minutes.

What is normal?

A small lump, pain, itching, redness and swelling are common. Redness can be harder to see on brown or black skin, so also check for warmth, tenderness and swelling.

Symptoms usually improve within a few days, although redness and itching can sometimes last up to 10 days. A reaction that starts quickly is usually inflammation or allergy rather than infection. Most bites and stings do not need antibiotics.

Relieving pain and itching

- Take paracetamol or ibuprofen for pain if these medicines are suitable for you.
- A pharmacist can advise about an oral antihistamine or hydrocortisone cream for itching and swelling.
- Follow the medicine label. Ask a pharmacist what is suitable for a child, during pregnancy or breastfeeding, or if you take other medicines.

Where to get help

See a community pharmacist

For adults and children aged 1 year or over, a pharmacist can assess a bite or sting and advise on symptom relief. Through Pharmacy First, they can also assess and treat an infected insect bite when appropriate.

- the area is hot, increasingly painful or swollen
- redness is spreading or there is pus or fluid
- you need advice about medicines

Get urgent advice from CHG or NHS 111 today

Use NHS 111 if CHG is closed, or if you are unsure where to go.

- symptoms are getting worse or are not improving
- the sting is in the mouth or throat, or close to an eye
- there is tummy pain and vomiting, dizziness or light-headedness
- there is a high temperature, swollen glands or you feel generally unwell
- there were several stings
- there has been a serious allergic reaction to a bite or sting before
- a child under 1 year old has been bitten or stung
- you become unwell after a bite acquired abroad

Call 999 for any anaphylaxis warning sign

Do not wait to see whether an antihistamine works. Use an adrenaline auto-injector immediately if one has been prescribed.

After a serious allergic reaction

Arrange follow-up with CHG after emergency treatment. You may need specialist allergy assessment. If adrenaline auto-injectors are prescribed, carry two and make sure you and people close to you know how to use them.

Reducing the chance of another bite or sting

- Stay calm and move away slowly from bees, wasps or hornets. Do not swat at them.
- Wear shoes outdoors, cover exposed skin and use insect repellent as directed when insects are active.
- Keep food and drinks covered outside. Take care with open cans and sweet drinks.
- Avoid strongly scented products. Do not disturb nests; arrange professional removal if one is near your home.
- Use window screens or bed nets when appropriate.

Ticks and travel

If a tick is attached, use a tick-removal tool or fine-tipped tweezers. Grip it as close to the skin as possible and pull upwards slowly without squeezing it. Clean the area afterwards. See the CHG Tick bites and Lyme disease leaflet. Get medical advice if you later develop flu-like symptoms or a spreading round or oval rash, which may or may not look like a bullseye.

Before travel abroad, check current advice for your destination. Some mosquitoes and other insects can spread serious infections. Use repellent, cover exposed skin and use a treated bed net where advised. Tell a clinician where and when you travelled if you become unwell during or after the trip.

How to contact CHG

For non-urgent medical advice, use the CHG appointments and online contact page. If you cannot use the online route, call reception on 01285 653122 or 01285 653184.

[CHG appointments and online contact](#). For print users:
cirencesterhealthgroup.co.uk/appointments/

When CHG is closed, use NHS 111 for urgent medical help. Call 999 for a medical emergency.

The Avenue Surgery: 1 The Avenue, Cirencester, GL7 1EH.

St Peters Road Surgery: 1 St Peters Road, Cirencester, GL7 1RF.

If you need help reading this leaflet, another format, or want to report unclear information, please contact CHG.

Trusted further information

- [NHS: Insect bites and stings](#)
nhs.uk/conditions/insect-bites-and-stings/
- [NHS: Anaphylaxis](#)
nhs.uk/conditions/anaphylaxis/
- [NHS: Lyme disease](#)
nhs.uk/conditions/lyme-disease/
- [TravelHealthPro: country information](#)
travelhealthpro.org.uk/countries