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 can transfer blood from other people and animals they’ve bitten to you. That means 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 for an ambulance (in the US and Canada, dial 9-1-1) 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 nonprescription 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 cannot 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.

More on this topic

Patient education: Anaphylaxis (The Basics)
Patient education: Anaphylaxis symptoms and diagnosis (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: Bee and insect stings (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: Imported fire ants (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: West Nile virus infection (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: What to do after a tick bite to prevent Lyme disease (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: Lyme disease prevention (Beyond the Basics)
Patient education: Lyme disease symptoms and diagnosis (Beyond the Basics)

All topics are updated as new evidence becomes available and our peer review process is complete.

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Insect sting

This is a normal reaction to a bee or wasp sting. There is usually some redness and mild, painful swelling around the spot where the stinger went in. These symptoms usually go away within a few hours.

Courtesy of Theodore Freeman, MD.

Graphic 63900 Version 2.0