

How to Treat Bug Bites and Bee Stings

Buzzing, biting, and stinging can put a damper on warm evenings spent outside.

If you tend to scratch at itchy bug bites, you can open the skin to infection. But, an allergic reaction can be much more severe, even life-threatening. Plus, mosquitoes can spread viruses like Encephalitis, Zika, Chikungunya, and West Nile. Thankfully, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has no data to suggest that mosquitoes spread COVID-19. But, we all need to be prepared to prevent and treat the swelling, itching, and pain that come with outdoor pests.

Are you a magnet for mosquito bites?

If mosquitoes seem to be drawn to you, your body temperature, the amount of carbon dioxide you exhale, or your body odor could be the cause. These are just some of the naturally-occurring characteristics mosquitoes seek.

Alleviate the itch



Avoid scratching the affected area because that can increase swelling and break your skin, making the site more vulnerable to infection. Take an oral antihistamine

(like Benadryl) to reduce itching and inflammation.

One or more of these may help soothe the skin and reduce swelling, itchiness, and pain:

- Calamine lotion
- Antihistamine cream
- A bag of ice or cold pack
- A small drop of honey
- Aloe Vera gel
- Oatmeal paste (a mixture of oatmeal and water)
Or soak in an oatmeal bath (add one cup of oatmeal to a bathtub full of warm water)
- Baking soda paste (a mixture of baking soda and water)
Apply for 10 minutes then wash away. Stop if skin irritation occurs.
- Basil
A study by the National Institutes of Health found that a chemical in basil might help relieve itchy skin. Rub onto the bite finely chopped fresh basil leaves or a basil paste (boil two cups of water, add a half-ounce of dried basil leaves, and let it steep until it cools).
- Apple cider vinegar
This can also act as a natural skin disinfectant. If you have many bites, soak in a warm bath with two cups of vinegar. If skin irritation occurs, stop this treatment.
- Onion juices
This is a natural antifungal. Rinse and wash the skin afterward.
- Thyme
This also can serve as a mild antibacterial and antifungal. Finely chop fresh thyme leaves, gently rub them on the bite, and let it sit for 10 minutes.

- Lemon balm plant
This is a natural skin astringent. Finely chop the leaves and apply them to the bite. Or, try a store-bought lemon balm essential oil.
- Witch hazel
This is a natural skin astringent.
- Chamomile tea
Steep a tea bag in water in the refrigerator for 30 minutes, squeeze out excess water, and apply the tea bag directly to the bite for 10 minutes.
- Garlic
Finely chop fresh garlic and mix it with an unscented lotion or coconut oil. Apply it to the bite for 10 minutes. Without the cream or oil, applying chopped garlic directly to the skin can sting.

Do I need a doctor?

If you're having an allergic reaction to a mosquito bite, seek immediate medical attention. An allergic reaction can include hives; difficulty breathing; and swelling of the face, lips, tongue, or throat.

If you're experiencing any of these symptoms of a mosquito-borne virus, call your doctor:

- fever
- body aches
- headache
- upset stomach
- neck stiffness
- confusion
- vision changes
- neurologic changes

Yes, you can avoid mosquito bites in the first place

- Wear lightweight long-sleeved shirts and pants.
- Avoid being outside during sunset.
- Stay away from standing water.
- Wear bug repellent. These are the only EPA-approved active ingredients for bug repellents you can apply to the skin:
 - DEET
 - Picaridin (known as KBR 3023 and icaridin outside the U.S.)
 - IR3535
 - Oil of lemon eucalyptus (OLE)
 - Para-menthane-diol (PMD)
 - 2-undecanone

DEET is the most commonly used insect repellent. It has a broad spectrum and can repel both mosquitos and ticks. But is it safe?

"DEET is safe for pregnant women in their second and third trimester," says Fabrizio Galimberti, M.D., Ph.D., a dermatologist with the University of Miami Health System. "However, children under two should not use DEET, according to the U.S. Food and Drug Administration. The safest form of protection for young children is to avoid bites by wearing protective clothing and/or avoiding areas with a lot of mosquitos."

If you are also using sunscreen, apply that first, then apply the bug spray. For children, spray insect repellent onto your hands first, then apply it to a child's face. For children under three years old, do not use products containing oil of lemon eucalyptus (OLE) or para-menthane-diol (PMD). Do not apply insect repellent to a child's hands, eyes, mouth, or irritated/broken skin. You can also cover a baby stroller with mosquito netting.

“If you get an itchy sensation or a red rash when you apply any of these products, it’s possible that your skin has an allergy to one or some of its ingredients,” Dr. Galimberti said. “In that case, stop using the product and switch to another one.”

Ouch! The dreaded bee and wasp stings

These painful, red bumps can ruin an afternoon. But, bee stings can be life-threatening for those who are allergic to the venom.

Avoid scratching at a sting because that can increase swelling and break your skin, making the area more vulnerable to infection.

- Immediately remove any stingers left in the skin.
- Wash the area with soap and water.
- Remove any jewelry before you swell.
- Avoid scratching the sting, which can worsen redness, pain, and itching.
- Take an oral antihistamine (like Benadryl or Claritin).
- For pain relief, take acetaminophen (like Tylenol) or ibuprofen (like Advil). Follow the manufacturer’s instructions for dosage and timing.
- If it’s been more than 10 years since your last tetanus booster, get a booster within the next few days.

Apply one or more of the following to reduce the redness, inflammation, and pain of a bee/wasp sting:

- Antibiotic ointment (like Neosporin)
- Hydrocortisone cream
- Calamine lotion
- A cold compress or ice wrapped in a towel (for 20 minutes every hour)
- Honey
- Baking soda

- Apple cider vinegar
- Toothpaste
- Meat tenderizer
- Aloe Vera
- Calendula cream
- Lavender essential oil
- Tea tree oil
- Witch hazel

See your doctor if:

If you receive many bee or wasp stings at once or have a history of allergic reactions to stings, seek immediate medical attention. Keep in mind, it's not safe to drive yourself to the E.R. while you're experiencing a severe allergic reaction.

A mild allergic reaction to a bee or wasp sting might include a rash and itching over the body, which can be treated with an oral antihistamine. If you see a doctor, you may also be given steroids to lower the body's histamine reaction.

A severe allergic reaction to bee venom can include hives, swelling of the face, mouth, tongue, or throat; anaphylaxis (nausea, vomiting, difficulty breathing, rapid pulse, shock, loss of consciousness); dizziness; diarrhea; and pale skin. If you've been prescribed an epinephrine auto-injector device for allergic reactions (often referred to as an EpiPen), use it immediately as directed. It's a good idea to always carry two of these with you and to routinely check their expiration dates.

Avoid the sting

- Don't walk around barefoot outside.
- If you encounter a beehive, leave it alone and call a pest control professional for removal.

- Don't wear sweet-smelling perfume, hair products, or body products.
- Don't wear bright colors and flowery prints.
- Cover your food and sugary drinks outside.
- Don't drive with your windows down.
- Avoid uncovered garbage cans.

Dana Kantrowitz is a contributing writer for UMiami Health News.

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What diseases could mosquitoes carry?

“Mosquitoes of different species are common year-round in Miami,” says John C. Beier, Sc.D., Chief of the Environment and Public Health at the University of Miami Health System. [Read more.](#)