



5-minute safety talk

Biting and Stinging Insects: Don't Let 'em BUG You

Outdoor workers have enough to contend with besides bugs that bite and sting. For most people, bug bites cause temporary redness and pain. But for others, bites and stings may trigger a life-threatening emergency. Understanding the risks and basic treatment can help all outdoors workers deal with these pests.

Avoid the insect world's most wanted

Mosquitoes, fleas, black flies, mites, chiggers and ticks use their mouth to suck blood from humans. Bees, hornets, yellow jackets, wasps and scorpions use a stinger to inject their venom. Spiders and ants both sting and bite.

Bug bites give most people minor skin reactions like swelling, redness, pain and itching. Sometimes there is excessive swelling at the bite site. Bites can also cause headaches and vomiting.

Tick bites do not usually cause an immediate reaction, but are dangerous because they can transmit Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever and other diseases. Ticks normally attach to humans on the scalp or under the arms. Always check for ticks, especially after working in wooded, swampy or grassy areas. A tick bite might look like a small rash sometimes taking the form of a bullseye.

Don't be a bug bistro

The best way to avoid bites is to make yourself unappetizing to bugs. Sweet smells attract insects. Don't leave out food or open drinks. Never drink from a can or bottle that might have an insect inside.

Do not use colognes, perfumes, scented soaps or hairsprays. Do apply insect repellent (follow directions on label).

Cover up with long pants, long-sleeve shirts, socks, shoes and a hat. Dress in pale colors, such as light green, tan and khaki, and avoid clothing with bright colors or flowery prints. Protect your hands with gloves.

It is extremely important to safeguard your body from bites. Wearing personal protective equipment such as gloves, crawl suits, and hats is extremely important.

Screens, tents and other covering should be used to enclose the work area to keep pests out.

Be aware of insects' nests. Yellow jackets nest in the ground and in walls. Hornets and wasps nest in bushes, trees and under the eaves of buildings. Spiders prefer dark areas. Fire ants live in large mounds. Insects are most active at dawn and dusk.

Plan an attack against pests

Worksite emergency action plans should cover bites and stings. An individual trained in first aid should be available on site to treat allergic reactions of various kinds including bee stings. An emergency rescue plan would call for off-site trained individuals, such as paramedics.

Some basic first aid steps can relieve bite pain and help prevent infection. Clean the area around the bite with soap and water and apply ice or a cold pack. If the stinger is still in the wound, remove it before washing and icing the area by scraping the surface with something stiff like a credit card. Do not squeeze the area, or the stinger will release more venom.

If the bite is from a spider or scorpion, capture the insect and seek medical attention. Most spiders and scorpions in the United States are not poisonous, but some bites (e.g. all brown recluse spider bites) will need a doctor's attention.

When removing ticks, use a pair of tweezers to grasp the tick close to the skin. Pull very gently to tent the skin until the tick lets go. Avoid pulling too hard or jerking, which may leave part of the tick in the skin. Wash the area with soap and water, then put an antiseptic such as rubbing alcohol or an antibiotic cream on the site. Seek medical attention if a rash appears around the site or the victim later experiences chills, joint pain or other flu-like symptoms.

Act on allergies

Individuals who have an allergic reaction to bites and stings experience severe symptoms that require emergency medical attention.

One severe reaction, called anaphylaxis, causes a person's eyes, nose, lips, throat and tongue to swell, possibly resulting in difficulty breathing. The individual may become unconscious or have skin hives, severe itching or generalized swelling. This reaction usually starts just minutes after the sting and in some cases may be fatal.

If this occurs, call 911 or your local/work emergency number immediately. Anyone who has experienced a severe reaction to an insect bite should carry an epinephrine auto-injector to treat future severe allergic reactions. Employers should be notified of any allergies so if an employee with an insect allergy is stung, they know how to properly react.

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