



Safety Scene

When the Bee Stings...

Bugs: A Cause for Concern on the Job

by Molly E. Butz

Don't dismiss those pesky flying insects and creepy crawlers; learn about the dangers they can pose and educate those around you.

It may be one of those things you only think about when you're packing your bags for a wilderness adventure, but animals can be a workplace safety hazard, too. No, you probably won't encounter a grizzly bear fishing wood scraps out of your garbage dumpster, but there are a host of insects and spiders that can unexpectedly attack and leave you itchy, sore or even worse.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), insects and arachnids inflicted 36,100 nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses between 1992 and 1997. Both indoor and outdoor workers can be victims of random insect and arachnid encounters. It's important to understand which bugs pose a threat in your region, what "symptoms" to look for, and when it's time to go to the emergency room.

Who & Where

There are a large number of insects and arachnids that can inflict painful and potentially dangerous bites or stings. Bees, wasps and hornets are common in all areas of the United States and tend to be more active during the warmer months of the year. And virtually no region is exempt from at least one of a handful of venomous spiders including Black Widow, Brown Recluse and Hobo spiders. In the southwest, the sting of a scorpion can pack a nasty punch; and in the southeast, fire ants are becoming increasingly common. They may be small, but they can cause serious injury.

In addition, workers in most regions are also threatened by minor bites from pesky pests including mosquitoes, horseflies, deerflies, black flies and ticks, which can also carry more serious diseases such as Lyme Disease and Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever. From tiny, annoying bites to sore, uncomfortable stings, every insect incident is worth assessing.

Signs & Symptoms

Nothing can predict what will happen if a bite or sting occurs, and each person's body will react differently. Even fairly harmless insects and spiders can have a tremendous effect on a person who is highly sensitive or allergic to the offending pest. Here are a few signs and symptoms to look for if you suspect a bite or sting:

- Red and/or swollen bump(s)
- Itching
- Hives
- Open sores (generally due to scratching—careful, these can get infected!)
- Anaphylaxis (a serious allergic reaction that can include difficulty breathing, dizziness, nausea, diarrhea, fever, muscle spasms or loss of consciousness)
- Angioedema (a different allergic reaction that causes swelling throughout the body, especially the face, lips and eye area)

Spider bites often cause a small amount of pain, redness, itching and swelling that lasts only a couple of days. Often, spider bites are even too small to be detected. However, some of the more venomous spiders listed above can cause a host of uncomfortable symptoms. If you think you may have been bit, here are some things to look for:

- A target or bull's-eye shaped wound
- Severe muscle pain and cramps
- Weakness
- Sweating
- Headache
- Itching
- Nausea and vomiting
- Difficulty breathing
- Pain or burning
- A blister that breaks open leaving an ulcer
- A slow-healing wound

Treatment

Most minor bites and stings can be treated at home, and the site of the bite will typically go away within a week. Keeping the area clean will help the healing process. If the swelling is uncomfortable, an ice pack can be applied for ten minutes at a time. And an over-the-counter antihistamine (e.g., Benadryl) can be taken to reduce the itchiness. If any of the symptoms get worse, persist for more than seven days, or you acquire more symptoms along the way, it's probably in your best interest to see your doctor.

Anaphylaxis is an extremely dangerous reaction to a bug bite or sting, and although various bites may necessitate medical attention, anaphylaxis can be fatal and MUST be treated immediately. If you notice any of the symptoms of anaphylaxis, notify emergency personnel right away. (If you KNOW that you have a serious allergy, arrange to have an emergency epinephrine kit with you at all times and teach your family and friends how to use it in case you are unable to. See sidebar for more details.)

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epinephrine:

An epinephrine kit is one of several syringe kits (Epipen, Anakit or Ana-guard) that contain a small, regulated dose of adrenaline (epinephrine). Adrenaline is a quick-acting hormone that the human body produces when presented with an emergency. It's the hormone that makes your heart beat rapidly and feel jittery while giving you the familiar feeling of ultra-alertness when you get jolted into a panic situation. However, adrenaline also works against the effects of anaphylaxis. You can inject it yourself, or have a companion inject it for you, and the kit can be prescribed by a doctor if you have experienced anaphylaxis in the past because of bee venom or any of a number of other triggers.

at a glance

- ❑ There are a host of insects and spiders that can unexpectedly attack and leave you itchy, sore or even worse.
- ❑ Insects and arachnids inflicted 36,100 nonfatal occupational injuries and illnesses on workers from 1992 to 1997.
- ❑ Anaphylaxis is an extremely dangerous reaction to a bug bite or sting, can be fatal and MUST be treated immediately.

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Spider bites may also require visiting your doctor, but generally the spiders found in the United States will not give a fatal bite to a healthy adult. Occasionally, the symptoms can be severe, but in most cases, keeping the wounded area clean and treating the symptoms is the only first aid that will be necessary. If muscle cramping, severe pain or shortness of breath occur as a result of the spider bite, medical attention is recommended.



Bite & Sting Prevention

There is no hard and fast way to absolutely prevent a bite or sting, but there are some "best practices" that will help you avoid an incident:

- Don't intentionally provoke insects. An angry hive of bees is highly likely to sting, sting, sting.
- Avoid perfumes, colognes and strongly scented deodorants which may attract or annoy insects.
- Use insect repellent when appropriate.
- Wear clothing suitable to your job and the environment and try to avoid very dark colors and large, bold or floral patterns.
- Be careful with sugary food and liquids, because they will attract bugs.

Insects and arachnids can be a serious threat to component manufacturer employees, but with a little common sense and a little bit of luck, you can avoid a critter calamity! **SBC**

To pose a question for this column or to learn more about WTCA's Operation Safety Program, contact WTCA Staff at 608/274-4849, email wtca@sbciindustry.com, or view the Operation Safety demonstration online at www.wtcalco.com.

sources:

- *Insect Bites and Stings*, University of Maryland Medical Center.
- *Are Animals Occupational Hazards*, Dino Drudi, Compensation and Working Conditions, Fall 2000.
- *Spider Bites*, <http://www.calpoison.org/public/spiders.html>.

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