

Sting, itch, bite?

Protection against insects and the ailments they bring

By Dr. Bernadette Wilks

Bug bites cause human illness through transmitted venoms or disease-causing germs such as viruses, bacteria, prions and spirochetes.

Mosquitoes and West Nile virus

West Nile virus (WNV) is spread to humans and animals by mosquitoes that feed on birds, or through blood-to-blood contact with an infected person or animal. Symptoms, which can last from days to weeks, are typically flu-like (vomiting, abdominal pain) and can include a rash. People who are immune-compromised or are over 50 years old are at risk of developing a severe form of WNV that travels to the brain or spinal cord, causing neurological abnormalities. If you suspect you have contracted WNV, visit your doctor.



Ticks and Lyme disease

Ticks are vectors of a number of infection-causing conditions such as Lyme disease. They live in tall grass and feed on the blood of their host. Symptoms associated with tick bites include a rash, fever, tiredness, body aches, stomach cramps, nausea, headache, neck stiffness, numbness and changes in heart rate. Lyme disease can cause neurologic or arthritic complications—so when

outdoors, take precautions to avoid bites (such as wearing clothing that covers your arms and legs). If you suspect a tick has bitten you, remove it slowly with tweezers. Wash the area, and visit your doctor if it has been attached for more than one day or if you develop Lyme disease symptoms. Keep the tick in a container to show your doctor.

Bee and wasp stings

Bees and wasps are less aggressive away from their nests; they tend to attack when threatened. If you are stung by a bee, remove the stinger immediately if possible, and ice the area. Wasps don't leave their stingers behind. Expect localized sharp burning pain

with redness and swelling that will last from hours, up to two weeks. Wasp stings can become intensely itchy after the first day. Some people experience systemic symptoms (lip swelling, stomach cramps, dizziness or breathing difficulties) almost immediately. If any of these symptoms occur, call 911 immediately.

Fleas: Tips for pets and humans


Dogs and cats can be unwilling hosts for fleas. Pet flea medications are available, but they are not always 100

per cent effective, and the fleas can make the jump to bite humans. If you find clusters of itchy bites on your skin, you can clean your sheets, clothes and treat the bites with anti-itching lotions. Check your pet regularly and visit your veterinarian for advice. For persistent infestations, contact a qualified pest controller.

Spider bites

Most spiders will not bite humans unless threatened, and a majority of these bites will cause only a mild reaction of swelling, inflammation or itch. In southern Canada, be wary of the black widow spider (jet-black with two reddish markings on their underside) and the brown recluse spider (brown with a dark violin pattern on their back); while they are rare, their bite can be fatal. If bitten, note the spider's appearance, clean the wound, apply ice and seek medical attention immediately.

Bites from other parasites

A variety of other bugs can sting or bite humans, including ants, mites and biting flies. These bites are frequently treated with washing the affected area, using ice to reduce swelling, and calamine lotion or antihistamines for itch. If you are concerned, seek medical advice. 

Bernadette Wilks, MBBS, BVA, is currently the Director of the Board for the Australian Medical Association in Victoria.