

Insect Bites & Stings

Bites and stings can be either poisonous or non-poisonous. The most dangerous Australian animals and insects are the taipan, tiger snake, death adder, the funnel-web and red-back spiders, the blue-ringed octopus, cone shells, stonefish, bullrout, box jellyfish and sting-rays.

The bites of most spiders and insects, including mosquitoes, fleas, and flies are usually not dangerous to the majority of the population. The swelling and pain usually lasts a few days. Mosquitoes in certain areas may transmit diseases such as malaria.

If you are bitten or stung by a non-venomous animal, medical attention may still be needed. This is especially the case if there is an allergic reaction to an otherwise non-venomous sting or bite.

However, for people allergic to insect or spider bites, these bites can cause severe trauma and shock. Also, the bites of a few spiders, ticks, and insects are poisonous or associated with specific diseases.

Although most ticks bites are harmless, several species can cause life-threatening diseases.

Bites from spiders can be poisonous or non-poisonous. If bitten by a funnel-web or red-back you need to seek immediate emergency attention. Bites from other spiders are seldom fatal; however some are at risk – infants, the elderly, and people with allergies. Other less venomous spiders can also require medical attention.

Actions

- Wash the wound thoroughly with a mild antiseptic and water.
- Cover the clean wound with a dressing and bandage or bandaid.
- Call the emergency number and seek help (unless the wound is obviously only minor). The person may not be up to date with their tetanus injections and need a shot.
- Apply first aid immediately and seek professional help- do not worry about the snake or trying to identify it. Severe problems may commence very quickly.

What to look for

- Puncture marks on the skin are the most obvious sign
- Red and swollen areas around the bite
- Nausea and vomiting
- Diarrhoea
- Headache
- Vision problems
- Faintness
- Tightness in the chest
- Breathing difficulties
- Unconsciousness

Caution

- Never cut the area where the snake bit to try to suck out the venom.
- Never apply a tourniquet or a restrictive bandage
- Never wash the venom off the skin – (the doctors may use this venom to identify the snake).

Actions

- Lay the victim down comfortably and try to keep them calm and still.
- **Never** elevate the bitten limb.
- Apply pressure to the bitten area with your hands.
- Apply a firm bandage over the bite as soon as you can. You may have to use whatever is available – a stocking or part of clothing.
- Apply a second bandage wrapping upwards from the toes or fingers to above the knee or elbow.
- Immobilise the limb in a splint or a sling (see entry on splints or slings).
- If the person is unconscious, place them in the lateral position, check the airways, breathing and pulse and begin EAR or CPR if necessary (see emergency techniques).
- **Dial 000 or your emergency number immediately.**

Funnel-Web Spider

This spider is a particularly venomous insect. The male is more so than the female and is smaller and more slender with a body of about 3 cm in length. This spider is large, black or can be reddish brown and is hairy. It is largely in the Sydney area and the coastal areas of New South Wales.

What to look for

- Intense pain around the affected area
- Abdominal pain and nausea
- Numbness
- Weakness
- Breathing difficulties
- Watery eyes
- Sweating
- Cold skin
- Shivering
- Coughing up secretions

Actions

- Treat as for bites from snakes (above)
- Seek medical help urgently – this spider is life threatening.

Red-Back Spider

The red-back spider is only the size of a pea and is black with a reddish stripe on its back. The female is the dangerous of the species.

What to look for

- Sharp, stinging sensations
- Pain around the bite (sometimes)
- Swelling and sweating around the bite
- Shock

Sometimes, an insect or spider bite causes a potentially fatal allergic reaction known as anaphylactic shock. Its symptoms include:

- Rapid swelling around the eyes, lips, tongue, or throat.
- Difficulty breathing.
- Wheezing or hoarseness.
- Severe itching or cramping, or numbness.
- Dizziness.
- A reddish rash, or hives.
- Stomach cramps.
- Loss of consciousness.

Caution

- Do not apply pressure immobilisation.

Actions

- Apply an ice pack or cold compress to the bite to ease the pain. (see sprains and lacerations).
- Seek medical help urgently
- Watch the person for signs of shock.

Bush Tick

The tick is only small, is oval-shaped and is commonly found along the eastern coast of Australia. This tick buries its head under the victim's skin. Its venom can cause paralysis, skin irritation and should be removed as soon as possible.

What to look for

- irritation at the affected area
- weakness of the facial area then the arms
- breathing difficulties

Actions

- Apply a drop of turpentine or kerosene to the tick (do not do this if the bite is near the eyes or the mouth), which may cause the tick to jump off.
- Use tweezers to lever the tick out. Make sure you remove the head. Never pinch or squeeze the tick. And do not try to pull the tick off.
- Ensure that there are no other ticks on the person.
- If the symptoms persist, or the victim is a child – seek medical help urgently.

Bees and Wasps

See the section on insect [bites and stings](#) as well.

What to look for

- Local pain
- Swollen area where stung
- Itchiness
- Rashes
- Puffy eyelids and face
- Breathing difficulties

Actions

- If it is a bee sting, remove the sting by rubbing it sideways with a knife blade or your fingernail. Never pull out the sting.
- Wipe the area and apply a cold compress.
- If the person is allergic, the person should take their medication immediately.
- If the person's reaction is severe, apply pressure immobilisation and begin EAR if necessary (see emergency techniques) and seek medical assistance immediately.

Blue-Ringed Octopus and Cone Shells

The blue ringed octopus is found along the Australian coastline, usually in rock pools. They are up to 20 cm in length (from end to end when their tentacles are spread) and the bite is often painless. The venom however is very dangerous and can bring on symptoms straight away. They often look attractive to children and they must be warned to stay away from them.

What to look for

- Blurred vision
- Lips and tongue may be numb
- Swallowing is difficult
- Breathing difficulties

Actions

- Apply pressure immobilisation
- Get urgent medical help immediately.
- When breathing becomes difficult, apply EAR (see emergency techniques) and continue until the ambulance arrives.

Box Jellyfish

These water creatures are found in the areas off tropical northern Australia. The tentacles may cause breathing and circulation failure and is fatal.

What to look for

- Intense pain

- Deep red welts on the skin
- Irrational behaviour
- Breathing difficulties
- Unconsciousness
- Circulation failure
- Breathing failure

Caution

Check the best time of the year to swim in certain areas, before you go swimming.

Actions

- If the person is unconscious or becomes that way, place them in the lateral position, check the airways, breathing and pulse and begin EAR or CPR if necessary (see emergency techniques).
- Wipe carefully the stung area with household vinegar, which will make the tentacles harmless, or remove the tentacles yourself.
- Do not cease EAR or CPR to do this. Do Not rub the area.
- Seek medical help urgently.
- Apply pressure immobilisation.

Sting-Rays

The lethal part is attached to the long tail on this creature.

What to look for

- Burning intense pain
- breathing difficulties

Actions

- Gently remove the barb if you can see it.
- Wash the area with hot water.
- Monitor breathing and give E.A.R if it is necessary (see emergency techniques).
- **Call an ambulance immediately.**

Stonefish

Always wear shoes when walking in rocky beaches and coral reefs and do not pick up odd looking rocks.

What to look for

- Severe spreading pain
- Sometimes the spine may be still in the skin
- Swollen skin
- Skin may be slightly discoloured
- Sweating

- Irrational behaviour
- Shock

Caution

Do not apply pressure immobilisation.

Action

- Call for medical assistance immediately
- Soak the area in hot water for 20 minutes at least
- Remove the spine if possible
- Watch the person's breathing and start EAR if you need to (see emergency techniques).

Alternative/natural Treatments

For minor bites some naturopaths recommend [calendula](#) ointment.

Homoeopathy – Pyrethrum tincture may help relieve pain. For allergic reactions, Apis is often helpful to take before the medical person arrives.

Dietary Considerations – Large doses of [B-complex](#) vitamins and/or [garlic](#) taken orally may act as an insect repellent. Large doses of [vitamin C](#), pantothenic acid, [calcium/magnesium](#) combination may benefit.

Aromatherapy – Try applying [lavender](#) or [tea tree oil](#) neat on the bites for relief.

Prevention

There are a few things which may help repel insects from you –

- Essential oil of [eucalyptus](#) (add 5 drops to a cup of water and dab on your skin).
- Essential oil of citronella.
- [Calendula](#) ointment.

When to seek further professional advice

- You think you have been bitten by a poisonous insect, animal, plant or spider.