

First Aid for Bites and Stings

A picnic, a hike, walking a pet, gardening are all healthy fresh-air pursuits. But they can also bring some less welcome results, like encounters with insects or even wild animals. Being well-prepared for the unexpected can add to your peace of mind.

Animal and Human Bites

Any bite, whether human or animal, can be serious because it can puncture or tear the skin and carry contaminated saliva into the body. Human bites and the bites of domestic animals are dangerous because of the risk of infection.

Bites from wild animals, such as bats, foxes, skunks, coyotes and raccoons may cause rabies, a disease that can be fatal without prompt medical attention. To be safe, until it is proven otherwise, always assume any bite from an animal could be infected with rabies.

More About Rabies

Rabies is a disease of the central nervous system caused by a virus. It is almost always fatal in humans if it is not treated. Rabies should be suspected in domestic animals if they behave in an unusual way (the gentle dog or cat that attacks for no apparent reason and shows unusual aggressive behavior towards its owner) and in all attacks by wild animals. The rabies virus can be transmitted to anyone who handles a diseased animal or touches the area of a wound infected with the virus.

Be especially careful when giving first aid to anyone you suspect may have been exposed to rabies or handling the live or dead animal involved. Wear gloves and wash your hands thoroughly after contact to reduce the risk of infection.

If the animal can be captured without risk to you or others, it should be kept for examination. If the animal must be killed, try to keep the head intact so that the brain can be examined for the rabies virus.

Even if a person has been injured by an animal infected with the virus, rabies can be prevented if medical treatment is given quickly.

First aid for animal and human bites

1. Examine the wound to see if the skin is broken.
2. If there is bleeding, allow the wound to bleed for a short time - this helps to clean it.
3. Wash the wound with antiseptic soap or detergent. Apply a bandage.
4. If the skin is broken, see your family doctor as soon as possible.

Snakebite

Rattlesnakes are the only poisonous snakes found in the wild in Canada. Although varieties of this snake are found in parts of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Ontario, they are not numerous, and snakebite is not common.

A rattlesnake's bite leaves two puncture holes in the skin. Venom is usually, but not always, injected during the bite. If venom is injected, the person will feel a burning sensation in the wound. This is followed by swelling and discoloration, severe pain, weakness, sweating, nausea, vomiting and chills. Breathing may be difficult.

First aid for snakebite

1. Make sure there is no danger of a second snakebite to either the person who has been bitten or yourself.
2. Have the person rest in a semi-sitting position and keep the affected limb below the heart. If the person is resting, venom will not spread as quickly.
3. Flush the bite with soapy water, if available, but do not apply cold compresses or ice.
4. Splint the limb as you would a broken bone.
5. Get the injured person to a doctor as soon as possible.

Precautions when dealing with snakes and snakebite

- Most snakes will be within 10 metres (30 feet) of the place where the bite took place - be careful.
- If there is any other method of transportation do not let a person bitten by a snake walk to medical help.
- Do not give the person alcohol to drink.
- Do not cut the puncture marks or try to suck out the poison with your mouth.
- If the snake is killed, take it with you for identification but do not touch the snake directly. Avoid the snake's head - a dead snake still may have a bite reflex.

Insect bites and stings

In most people, an insect bite or sting causes only painful swelling with redness and itching at the site. But some people are severely allergic to these stings and being stung may cause a life-threatening allergic reaction.

When a person has been stung, ask about any previous allergic reactions to a sting. Also look for the signs of allergic reaction.* If you suspect that it is occurring, place the person at rest and give appropriate first aid.

Signs and symptoms at the site of an insect bite or sting

- sudden pain
- swelling
- heat
- redness
- itching

First aid for an insect bite or sting

1. Examine the sting site closely, looking for the stinger that may still be in the skin. If it is there, remove it by gently and carefully scraping it and the attached poison sac from the skin. Do not use tweezers, fingers or anything that may squeeze more poison into the body.
2. For irritation at the site of the sting, apply rubbing alcohol, a weak solution of ammonia or a paste of baking soda and water. Ice can also be used. Do not use alcohol or ammonia near the eyes. If the sting is in the mouth, give the person a mouthwash of one teaspoonful of baking soda in a glass of water, or, give a piece of ice to suck on.

3. If there is swelling in the mouth, or if there is difficulty breathing, this is an emergency situation. Get medical help quickly.

Signs and symptoms of allergic reaction to an insect bite or sting

- general itching, rash
- a bump on the skin that may be white, pink, reddish or blotchy
- generalized swelling - especially of the airway or tongue
- trouble talking or swallowing
- weakness, headache, faintness
- fever
- breathing difficulties that may be severe
- anxiety, abdominal cramps, vomiting

First aid for severe allergic reaction

1. As soon as you identify severe allergic reaction, send for medical help.
2. Stop any activity and place the person in the most comfortable position for breathing - usually sitting upright.
3. People who know that they have an allergy to insect stings often carry prescribed medication, usually in the form of a prepared hypodermic syringe and oral medications in an allergy kit; e.g. ANA kit. Help the person use the prescribed medications.
4. Stay with the person until medical help takes over. Reassure the person since fear and anxiety will make the condition worse.

Ticks

Ticks are found in abundance throughout the forests in some parts of Canada. They drop from the foliage onto animals and humans, biting through the skin and anchoring themselves with barbed mouth parts. A tick will suck the host's (the person or animal) blood for many hours and become quite large. At the end of the meal, the tick detaches itself and drops off.

Poison from ticks may be harmful. They sometimes carry disease such as Lyme Disease that can spread to humans. A tick on the body should be removed. If you find a tick, check your body and clothing thoroughly; there may be others.

First aid for tick bite

1. Remove the tick. Grasp it as close as possible to the skin and pull it away with even, steady pressure. Avoid squashing an engorged tick. Infected blood may spurt into your eyes, mouth or a cut on the surface of your skin. If you do not have tweezers, wear gloves or cover your fingers with a plastic bag or tissue paper.
2. Clean the area with soap and water and apply an antiseptic to prevent infection. Wash your hands.
3. A doctor should see the injured person as there is a risk of disease transmission by ticks. Take the dislodged tick for identification.
4. If the site of the bite shows any sign of infection, or there are other worrisome signs or symptoms within the next week, the person should see a doctor.

Leeches

Leeches live in swamps, ponds, lakes and stagnant water. Some feed on the warm blood of animals or humans. A leech makes a tiny cut in the skin that may not be felt at the time, and attaches itself to feed on blood. Once a leech is attached, trying to pull it off often does not work. The leech may be torn into smaller parts, making it even harder to remove those parts still attached. This may increase the risk of infection.

First aid for lesions from leeches

1. Detach the leech by making it let go. Apply salt, heat from an extinguished match head or other source, or a drop of kerosene, turpentine or oil to its body. The leech should detach itself from the skin and fall off in one piece. Do not pull or scrape the leech off the skin.
2. Clean the area with a paste of baking soda and water or a weak solution of ammonia. This will also relieve irritation.
3. If the site of the bite shows any sign of infection in the next week, the person should see a doctor.

How to prevent bites and stings

The best way to prevent being bitten or stung is to avoid being exposed to animals or insects, but this is not always practical. Animals and insects usually only bite or sting if they feel threatened. By giving creatures plenty of room, and by not startling them, you will reduce the risk of being bitten

or stung. Follow the precautions below to further reduce your risk.

Preventing animal bites

- When traveling in the bush, make lots of noise. Animals in your path will hear you coming and get out of your way.
- When camping, use proper precautions for storing food, washing dishes, etc. Get more information on this from books on wilderness travel.
- Do not feed wild animals.
- Stay away from any animal that seems unusually friendly or fearless.

Preventing snakebite

Snakes do not attack or "hunt" people - they only bite when they feel threatened. If you are in "snake country":

- Learn more about the habits of snakes so you can better avoid them.
- Never put your hands or feet where you cannot see what is there:
 - - if climbing rocks, do not reach up and put your hand on a ledge where a snake may be sunning itself.
 - - do not kick under a dead tree to loosen it, there could be snake under the tree. Use a stick to loosen the tree.
- If you see a snake, avoid it. Remember a snake does not travel very far, and it will probably be in the same area on your return.

Preventing insect bites and stings

- Avoid using or wearing products to which stinging insects are attracted, for example:
 - certain perfumes and other scents attract insects.
 - aromatic hair shampoos often attract insects.
- If, near your home, you discover a nest of stinging insects, have it safely destroyed as soon as possible. Delaying this will only result in a larger nest with more insects.
- Teach children not to panic when bees or wasps come near them. Panicking will only agitate the insects. Teach children to wait calmly for the insects to leave, or to gently brush them away.

Preventing tick bites

