

First Aid for Insect Stings in Cats

The old adage, “curiosity killed the cat”, actually has an element of truth. Cats are nosy creatures, sniffing at anything of interest. Since felines find insects interesting, they sniff at them, and if they stick their nose where it doesn’t belong, they may get a quick reprimand that could be fatal.



Insects resent the intrusion of nosy cats, so they sting the closest body part, making eyes, ears, and feet easy targets. When a cat steps on an ant hill or disturbs a wasp nest or bee hive, the insects can swarm and sting the cat’s whole body! Spiders are loners that don’t swarm, but even one spider bite can be nasty.

The stings of bees, wasps, and hornets, and the bites of ants and spiders all spell trouble for kitties. Insect venom causes problems ranging from mild irritation to life-threatening shock. Observant pet owners can minimize the reaction by taking prompt action. Keep in mind that although first aid is started at home, severe cases require prompt medical care.

Here’s what you can do when your cat battles a bug:

1. **Be quick to recognize that your cat was bitten or stung.** If your kitty suddenly paws at his face, chews at his foot, or begins to swell in any area of the body, consider the possibility of an insect bite.
2. **Identify the insect.** Quickly search the area for flying insects as well as crawling ones. Since a spider is difficult to identify and may be poisonous, capture it if you can.
3. **In the case of bee stings, look for a stinger.** Bees are the only insects that leave their stingers in their victims. These abandoned stingers continue to secrete venom so removing them reduces the amount of toxin injected into the cat’s body. If the stinger is still attached to the cat, remove it by scraping a credit card over your cat’s coat and flick it off. Do not use tweezers that may squeeze more venom out of the stinger sac. Luckily, other flying insects (wasps, hornets) don’t leave a stinger behind.
4. **Soothe the bite site.** Make a thick paste of baking soda and water and apply it to the sting site. If your cat has multiple stings or bites, a soothing oatmeal bath is the way to go.
5. **Minimize swelling.** Apply an ice pack to the affected area for 10 minutes to reduce swelling. A bag of frozen peas serves as a handy ice pack for individual bites. A cooled towel works better for larger areas.

6. **Prevent allergic reactions.** Give a dose of oral anti-histamine (like diphenhydramine) to minimize the reaction and decrease itching. Consult your veterinarian first for proper dosing.
7. **Reduce the trauma of scratching.** Use a head cone if your cat continues to lick or scratch at the bite wound. Constant scratching will delay healing and may cause infection.
8. **Maintain hydration and food intake.** Give your cat fresh water to drink. Cats that are stung in the mouth may find it difficult to eat so feed them moist food. Dry food softened with water is less likely to upset the GI tract than canned food.

When is an insect bite serious?

Like some people, many cats are hypersensitive (very allergic) to insect stings or bites. The degree of reaction varies with the cat's immune system and the type of insect. Allergic reactions usually occur within 20 minutes of the bite, but may be delayed for hours so close monitoring is critical.

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Take your cat to the veterinary emergency clinic at the first sign of:

1. **Severe swelling** around the head and neck that could compromise respiration. Swelling in these areas may occur even if the bite occurred elsewhere.
2. **Hives on any part of the body.** Hives appear as bumps under the skin that raise the hair or as red bumps on hairless areas like the belly. Hives itch a lot, so the cat may roll in the grass or on the floor in an attempt to scratch at hard to reach places.
3. **Difficulty breathing or wheezing.** Cats usually don't breath through the mouth, so if your cat starts to pant, call your veterinarian.
4. **Excessive drooling.** If there is swelling in the throat, the cat has difficulty swallowing his own saliva and drools a lot.
5. **Agitation.** Some cats become anxious due to the itching and difficulty breathing. Also, the insect venom may affect the nervous system.
6. **Vomiting or diarrhea.** Even mild vomiting and soft stool can indicate trouble, so don't blow this symptom off.
7. **Dizziness or disorientation.** If your cat isn't alert or stumbles, he is having more than the normal reaction.
8. **Seizures.** This is a no-brainer. Call the veterinarian.

Medical treatment may save your cat's life and is aimed at reducing the allergic reaction and preventing shock. In addition to anti-histamines, your veterinarian may give your cat corticosteroids or epinephrine. The doctor may administer IV fluids to stabilize the cat and oxygen to help respiration. Blood and urine tests may be needed to rule out organ damage. The length of the hospital stay depends how quickly your kitty responds to therapy, but expect to leave her with the veterinarian for 1 or 2 days. Once the danger is passed and your cat returns home, your veterinarian may prescribe an Epi-Pen for use in future insect stings.

The goal here is not to stifle your cat's curious nature, but to be prepared for the consequences. That means you have to act quickly in case she reacts to an insect bite.

This client information sheet is based on material written by: Lynn Buzhardt, DVM

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