

Itchy or Painful Insect Bites

What insects cause itchy or painful bites?

Bites of mosquitoes, chiggers (harvest mites), fleas, and bedbugs usually cause itchy, red bumps. The size of the swelling can vary from a dot to a centimeter (half inch). The larger size does not mean that your child is allergic to the insect bite. Mosquito bites near the eye usually cause massive swelling for 2 days.

Clues that a bite is a mosquito bite are itchiness, a central raised dot in the swelling, presence of the bite on a surface not covered by clothing, summertime, and the child's being an infant (because an infant can't protect himself). Some mosquito bites in sensitive children form hard lumps that last for months. In contrast to mosquitoes, fleas and bedbugs don't fly; therefore, they crawl under clothing to nibble. Flea bites often turn into little blisters in young children.

Bites of horseflies, deerflies, gnats, fire ants, harvester ants, blister beetles, and centipedes usually cause a painful, red bump. Within a few hours, fire ant bites change to blisters or pimples.

How can I take care of my child?

• Itchy insect bites

Apply calamine lotion or a baking soda paste to the area of the bite. If the itch is severe (as with chiggers), apply nonprescription 1% hydrocortisone cream four times a day. Another way to reduce the itch is to apply firm, sharp, direct, steady pressure to the bite for 10 seconds. A fingernail, pen cap, or other object can be used. Encourage your child not to pick at the bites or they will leave marks.

• Painful insect bites

Rub the area of the bite with a cotton ball soaked in meat-tenderizer solution for 20 minutes. (Avoid the area around the eyes.) This will relieve the pain.

If you don't have any meat tenderizer, baking soda is a fair substitute. If these substances are not available, an ice cube may help. Give acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain relief.

How can I help prevent bites?

• Mosquitoes and chiggers

Many of these bites can be prevented by applying an insect repellent sparingly to the clothing or exposed skin before your child goes outdoors or into the woods. Repellents are essential for infants (especially those less than 1 year old) because they cannot bat the insects away.

• Bedbugs

The bed and baseboards can be sprayed with 1% malathion, but young children must be kept away from the area because this substance is somewhat poisonous. You may need to call in an exterminator.

• Fleas

Usually you will find the fleas on your dog or cat. If the bites started after a move into a different home, the fleas are probably from the previous owner's pets. Fleas can often be removed by bringing a dog or cat inside the house for 2 hours to collect the fleas (they prefer living on the dog or cat to living in the carpet) and then applying flea powder or soap to the animal outdoors. Careful daily vacuuming will usually capture any remaining fleas.

What kind of insect repellent should my child use?

There are two main types of insect repellent. Repellent used on the skin and repellent put on clothing. Repellent used on the skin contains a powerful ingredient called DEET. Repellent used on clothing uses an ingredient called permethrin to repel insects. Both are useful for preventing bites.

Insect repellents for skin

DEET

DEET is a very effective ingredient used to repel mosquitos, ticks and other bugs. When using a product containing DEET, follow these precautions:

- Use a repellent with 30% DEET for children and teens. 30% DEET protects for 6 hours. Use 10% DEET if you have concerns about DEET. 10% DEET is only effective for 2 hours.

- Do not use products with DEET in children younger than 2 months old. Breast-feeding women may use DEET.
- Do not put too much repellent on. Tell older children who apply their own repellent that a total of 3 or 4 drops can protect the whole body.
- Only put the repellent on exposed areas of skin. Be careful not to get DEET on clothing. DEET can damage clothing made of synthetic fibers, plastics (for example, eye glasses), and leather.
- Do not put DEET on the eyes or mouth. Don't put DEET on your child's hands if your child sucks his thumb or fingers.
- Don't put any repellent on areas that are sunburned or have rashes because the DEET is more easily absorbed in these areas.
- Remember to wash the repellent off with soap and water when your child returns indoors.

Other skin repellents

- Two new insect repellents are available (2005): Picaridin (from Cutter) is as effective as DEET in similar concentrations. Oil of lemon eucalyptus is as effective as low concentration DEET, but it is not approved for children under 3 years old.

Insect repellent for clothing: Permethrin

Permethrin is an ingredient found in insect repellents that are sprayed onto clothes. Duranon, Permanone, and Congo Creek Tick Spray are examples of these highly effective products. They are good for repelling mosquitoes and ticks. They have an advantage over DEET products because they can be put and left on clothing. Apply it to clothes before putting them on. You can also put it on other outdoor items (shoes, mosquito screen, sleeping bags). Do not put permethrin on skin because it quickly loses its effectiveness when put on skin.

When should I call my child's health care provider?

Call IMMEDIATELY if:

- A bite looks infected (red streaks, increased tenderness).

Call during office hours if:

- Itching or pain is severe after treatment.
- You have other questions or concerns.

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