

Treating Bites And Stings

How to recognize and treat the bites and stings of common pests.

By Stephanie Smith

ANT BITES. Your dog must have lain too close to an ant hill," Bear's vet said. Earlier that morning, Bear rolled over to have his tummy scratched and revealed a chest covered with yellowish-white blisters.

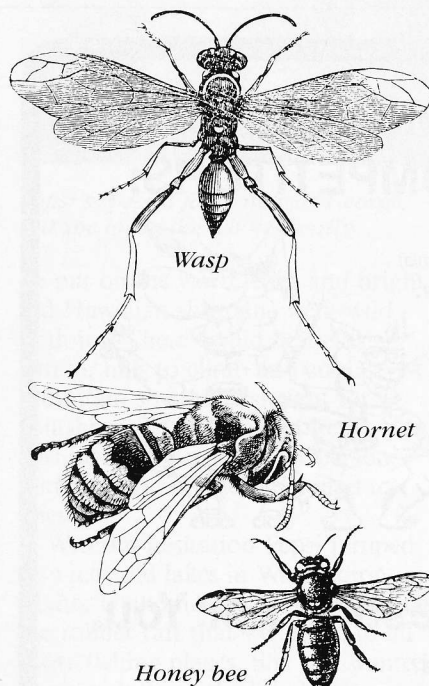
Dogs don't commonly come in contact with bees, wasps, ants, scorpions or spiders, says George Lees, a professor of small animal medicine and surgery at Texas A&M University, but you should know the signs of bites or stings and how to help your pet.

Pests That Sting

Bees and wasps. According to Tom Craig, professor of microbiology and parasitology at Texas A&M University, dogs have much the same reaction to being stung that people do: localized pain and swelling. "The problems caused by stings are not caused by the venom but by the body's reaction to the venom," says Dr. Craig. "The body produces histamines in an effort to cope, and these can make the dog uncomfortable."

Severe reactions are rare, although they do occur, usually as a result of multiple stings or when a dog is hypersensitive to the venom. The eyelids and ears of a hypersensitive dog may swell, and the dog may go into shock. Other signs include vomiting, diarrhea, heavy salivation, difficulty breathing, and pale eyes and gums.

A dog that has a severe reaction needs immediate veterinary attention; otherwise, an ice cube over the



sting will ease the pain and swelling. If you can find a stinger, remove it. If your dog seems to need an antihistamine or other pain medication, ask your veterinarian to recommend one. He or she can also tell you the proper dosage.

Ants. During the summer, ant bites are common. Again, it is the body's response to the venom that causes the problem. Pustules form several days after the dog is bitten. "The pustule occurs because the body tries to wall off the venom with special cells, and as these cells die, they form the pustule," Dr. Craig says.

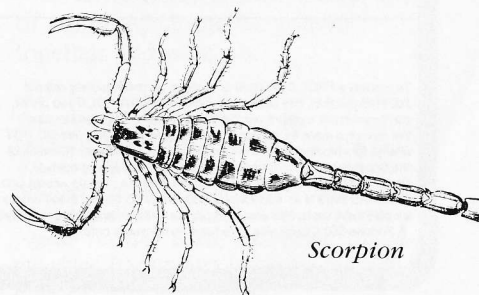
Puppies and older dogs are most at risk from ants, because they may not be quick enough to move away from the ants and may receive multiple bites. A dog that suffers numerous ant bites may go into shock or show signs of hypersensitivity.

Ant bites are treated in much the same way as bee and wasp stings,

but antibiotics may be necessary to clear up the pustules that form. If you know your dog has been bitten by ants, put ice on the wound to reduce swelling and bathe the dog in water that contains colloidal oatmeal, which helps draw the venom out, reducing itching and swelling. Your dog should stay in the bath for 15 minutes a day for several days. Of course, convincing your dog to stay in the bath may take some doing. Dogs that itch may benefit from an antihistamine or steroids, so consult your veterinarian if the dog seems to be scratching excessively or if it is mutilating itself by scratching and biting at wounds.

Scorpions. These members of the arachnid family come in two varieties: poisonous and nonpoisonous. Stings from nonpoisonous scorpions are treated in much the same way as wasp stings, with ice on the wound, and antihistamines or pain medication as needed.

Poisonous scorpions are rare in the United States; they are found only in Arizona, New Mexico and the California side of the Colorado river, but they are abundant in the desert areas of other countries. When a dog is stung by a poisonous scorpion, there is immediate pain and there may be some tingling and numbness at the site of the sting. The dog may appear tense and restless, with abnormal or random head,



Stephanie Smith is a Ph.D. candidate in psychology at Texas A&M University. She is owned by Bear, a Cocker mix; Elizabeth, a miniature Poodle; and Alexander, a Siamese mix. She does obedience work with Bear and Elizabeth.

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neck and eye movements. In addition, it may have a rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, weakness and excessive salivation. If you know your dog has been stung by a poisonous scorpion, or if it shows these signs, take it to a veterinarian immediately. Your vet will treat the sting with antivenin if available and will treat the signs.

Spider Bites

Spider bites are rare, but they can be dangerous if the spider is poisonous. Two poisonous spiders are found in North America: the brown recluse and the black widow.

The brown recluse does not usually kill its victims, but according to Dr. Craig, its venom kills large amounts of skin in local areas, which must be replaced through plastic surgery or slow regeneration.

When a dog is bitten by a brown recluse, the tissue around the area

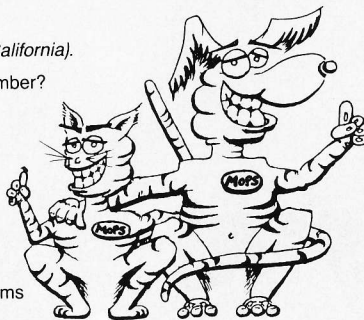
becomes black and the bite swells, giving the appearance of a bull's-eye on the dog. The swelling increases and fills with blood, then ruptures. This leaves an ulcer that forms a scab, which sloughs off, leaving a deep hole. At this point, the wound looks like a third-degree burn. Some dogs may have an ulcer right down to the muscle.

Treatment consists of antibiotics to prevent infection and steroids to reduce itching and swelling. Once the ulcer heals, the veterinarian can determine whether skin grafts will be necessary.

The bite of a black widow can kill a dog. This spider injects a neurotoxin that does serious damage to the dog's body. The bites of the brown recluse and the black widow look similar at first, but the black widow bite does not kill the tissue around it. Instead, the dog may show signs of overexcitement and intense shivering, and it may suffer seizures. Other signs include restlessness, breathing trouble, vomiting, salivation, weakness and increased skin temperature over the affected area. A dog with these signs should be rushed to the veterinarian; first-aid measures won't help. Antivenin exists, but few vets have it on hand because it is expensive and does not have a long shelf-life. Most veterinarians will treat the dog's symptoms and hospitalize it until the crisis is over.

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Avoiding Trouble

The best prevention measures are those that keep your dog out of environments containing hazardous pests. Wasps and bees usually build nests out of dogs' reach, but nests may be blown down in a storm. If these nests are common in your area, know where they are so you can keep your dog away. The same goes for ant nests. An exterminator may be able to rid you of these pests.

Scorpions, brown recluses and black widows favor dark, cool places. The crawl space under a house is an ideal environment for them, so dogs should be kept out of that area.

Most dogs will never have serious encounters with bees, wasps, ants, scorpions or spiders, but it is best to be prepared. Know what first-aid measures are necessary and when to take your dog to the veterinarian. Prompt treatment could save your dog's life.



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