

Insect bites and stings: antimicrobial prescribing

Information for the public

Published: 22 September 2020

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Insect bites and stings: do I need antibiotics?

Insect bites and stings are very common. They often cause rapid skin redness and itching around the bite or sting but are not usually serious. They generally get better within hours or days, although sometimes longer, and do not usually need treating with antibiotics.

Most people with an insect bite or sting will not be offered antibiotics. This is because antibiotics only help when the skin is infected, and most bites and stings do not cause an infection.

Using antibiotics when they are not needed means they may not work as well in the future. This is a serious health risk, so NICE has written advice about when to offer antibiotics for some common conditions. However, you will be offered antibiotics if you need them because there is likely to be an infection.

Seek medical advice if your symptoms suddenly get much worse at any time or you feel very unwell. You may be referred to hospital if you have signs of a serious illness, such as serious allergic reaction.

Talk to your local pharmacist about other ways to help with symptoms. You may like to try oral antihistamines (not for babies under 1 year) to help relieve itching. But there is uncertainty about how well they work for insect bites or stings. Some antihistamines cause drowsiness, which might help you sleep at night. Avoid scratching the skin, to help reduce any swelling and the likelihood of the bite or sting becoming infected.

Making decisions together

Decisions about treatment and care are best when they are made together. Your health professionals should give you clear information, talk with you about your options, and listen carefully to your views and concerns, taking into consideration what is important to you.

If you cannot understand the information you are given, tell your health professional.

Read more about [making decisions about your care](#).

Where can I find out more?

The [NHS website](#) has more information about:

- [insect bites and stings](#) and
- [antibiotics](#).

This organisation can give you advice and support: [St John Ambulance](#), 08700 104950.

We have also written information on [why antibiotics should be used wisely](#).

We wrote this guideline with health professionals and members of the public. All the decisions are based on the best research available.

ISBN: 978-1-4731-3852-0