



Insect Stings

On a warm summer afternoon when your cat is playing in the garden they are at risk from inadvertently disturbing the local wildlife. Wasps and bees are the most common cause of insect stings in UK pets. However ants may also bite (or "sting") pets. Bees and their cousins, bumblebees, wasps, hornets and ants, do not usually sting unless stepped on, touched, or molested. They are usually not active at temperatures below 13°C or on rainy days. Most stings therefore occur in midsummer around August.

What should I do if my cat has been stung?

If you suspect that your pet has been stung you should first try to find out how many times they have been stung and where the stings are. Stings to the face and throat are often more serious than those elsewhere on the body. If the throat or airways become swollen it can be difficult for the cat to breathe.

Any animal stung in areas around the face or throat should receive an urgent veterinary examination and be placed under close observation. If an animal is allergic to the sting they may develop a more serious reaction affecting the whole body and if this happens you should get your pet to a vet immediately.

Bees - If your pet has been stung by a bee it is likely that the stinger will still be in the skin. This can continue to inject venom for some time. Emergency management of a bee sting involves rapid (ideally immediate) removal of the sting to prevent further toxin injection. Application of ice and meat tenderiser (papain) may help to reduce any swelling.

How do I remove a bee sting?

The bee "stinger" contains venom that can continue to be injected into the skin. The best method of removing the stinger is to lightly drag a credit card or similar sharp edge across the coat, brushing out the sting. If this fails, tweezers can be used to remove the stinger. However there is a risk that by squeezing the stinger as it is grasped more venom will be expressed into the skin.

Wasps - It is not essential to remove wasp stings from the skin. Ice should be applied to the area to reduce any swelling. Papain (meat tenderiser) can be helpful in the treatment of such stings.

Ants produce a kind of acid, formic acid, which is injected into the victim with a bite. Neutralising the bite with bicarbonate of soda will relieve the discomfort.

Ice can be applied to all stings to reduce any swelling. Ice cubes, or alternatively a pack of frozen peas, should be wrapped in a tea towel so that the ice is not applied directly to the skin. This will make the procedure more comfortable for the patient. If the site remains painful, red or swollen for more than a few hours, you should ask your vet for further advice.

How can I relieve the itch associated with insect bites?

Bee venom acidic. Wasp stings have a neutral rather than alkaline pH. Formic acid, produced by ants, has a pH of 2-3 and is therefore markedly acidic. The acid stings of bees and ants may be relieved by the application of a mild alkali. Bicarbonate of soda (baking soda) can be diluted and applied to the affected area. Calamine lotion is another commonly available mild alkali that can be recommended. If you do not have access to these, toothpaste (which often contains bicarbonate) can be applied in small amounts over the sting. The swelling and discomfort caused by a wasp sting is best relieved by ice packs and antihistamine cream. Where itching persists, you should consult your veterinary surgeon who may prescribe a hydrocortisone cream if necessary.