

Creeping, Crawling Critters Can Ruin Summer Fun

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Toxicologists at UCSD Medical Center and the [San Diego Division of the California Poison Control System](#) recommend taking a few simple precautions to protect your family against summer stings, bites and bugs.

Snake Bites

In the warm summer months, even beach-loving San Diegans head for the hills for hiking, biking, camping and other outdoor activities. This season, UCSD toxicologists have already treated several patients at UCSD Medical Center and other hospitals.

This region averages 50 to 60 snakebites a year, according to [Richard Clark, M.D., director, Division of Medical Toxicology at UC San Diego](#) and medical director, San Diego Division of the California Poison Control System. Most bites are from rattlers and occur when people try to handle the snakes or stick their hands down holes and under logs, said Clark.

“If an adult is bitten, it’s usually because he or she is trying to handle the snake, get it off the road, or something like that,” said Clark. “With children, they usually are bitten by surprise or because they don’t know they should be afraid.”

With some rattlesnake bites, no venom is injected into the wound, but because it is impossible to know if venom has or has not been injected, getting medical treatment quickly is important.

What to Do?

Administration of antivenom is the most important treatment. Traditional first aid treatments such as applying ice, using a tourniquet, or applying suction to the wound, have little value and may cause more injury.

If the victim is in a remote area when bitten by a rattler, first immobilize the wounded area, especially for a hand or arm bite, then proceed slowly to a vehicle. If bitten on the leg or foot, it might be necessary to use that limb to get to the vehicle, unless someone can carry the bite victim. Get to the nearest phone, call 911 and wait for assistance. If there is no phone nearby, proceed to the nearest hospital or health care provider.

Bee Stings

Yearly reminders about bee stings are always part of UCSD Medical Center and California Poison Control System's public outreach. This year, however, Africanized bees are proving to be a larger player in the summer scene than in previous years.

"Africanized honey bees are in San Diego now," said Clark. "They are more aggressive than other bees so we advise people to stay away from wild bee colonies." Bees are considered wild unless they are managed by professional bee keepers.

Africanized bees like to move around. They are often seen traveling together, coming out of a water main or a bird house or from under the eave of a home. The main difference between these bees and others is that they respond to a threat more aggressively with more bees.

As Clark explained, "The venom is the same but you get stung by more of them when Africanized bees are involved. They react by defending their colony."

What to Do?

If attacked, the person being threatened should run and seek shelter away from the swarm, in a car with the windows rolled up, a house, a building, or any place that is not exposed to the outside.

If someone is stung, and is allergic, get the victim to a healthcare provider immediately. Even if the victim is not allergic or unsure, but receives multiple stings from the swarm, seek healthcare immediately to be on the safe side.

Black Widow Spiders

There are 50,000 different kinds of spiders in the world and all of them have some amount of venom with varying degrees of potency. Fortunately, most spiders are not dangerous to humans because their fangs are either too short or too fragile to penetrate human skin.

"When it comes to black widows, a severe bite usually means severe pain," said Clark. Severe muscle pain and cramps may develop in the first two hours, usually first felt in the back, shoulders, abdomen and thighs. Other symptoms include weakness, sweating, headache, anxiety, itching, nausea, vomiting, difficult breathing and increased blood pressure. Young children, the elderly and those with high blood pressure are at highest risk of developing more severe symptoms from a black widow spider bite.

What to Do?

Getting medical help is very important but keep in mind, the need for black widow antivenom is uncommon, and fatal cases of black widow spider bites in the United States are extremely rare.

Within the next few months, UCSD Medical Center toxicologists will be starting a study with a new antivenom specifically developed to treat black widow spider bites.

Mosquitoes and Ticks

They are seemingly insignificant pests, but, oh, the damage they can bring. Clark advises anyone who is going to be in wilderness areas to considering using a repellent containing "DEET." It is the best protection from biting insects. "We want to remind campers, walkers, hikers, and the public in general, that San Diego does have occasional cases of West Nile virus and Lyme disease," said Clark. West Nile is spread through the mosquito's bite and Lyme disease is carried by ticks.

What to Do?

If someone develops unusual symptoms such as fever and other flu-like symptoms after participating in wilderness activities, seek a healthcare provider immediately.

Sting Rays

Yes, even the beach can take a bite out of fun. The San Diego Division of the California Poison Control System receives many, many calls from beachgoers who report being stung by venomous marine animals such as jellyfish, scorpion fish or stingrays. If this occurs, the stinger should be removed and the wound washed with soap and water. Clark said that hot water has proven to be very effective in decreasing or eliminating the pain caused by sting ray venom.

What to Do?

Clark recommends placing the affected area in water that is as hot as the sting victim can tolerate without burning the skin. Using this therapy, the victim should feel better within 30 minutes. If not, see a healthcare provider immediately.

"We also see a pretty significant incidence of infection from sting ray barbs," said Clark. "So, even if, with the hot water treatment, the pain goes away, those who are stung must wash the area thoroughly with soap and water."

If redness, drainage or swellings appear, there is likely an infection. It is important to see a healthcare provider for treatment if an infection develops.

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