Ow! How do I deal with red ant bites? [1]

Dear Alice,

I got bit three times on the foot by small red ants and my foot is swollen... what should I do?

Answer

Dear Reader,

It sounds as though you had an unfortunate run-in with a mean gang of fire ants — aggressive red insects named for their intensely painful, burning sting. If a fire ant feels threatened by a foot or hand, it will latch onto the skin and sting up to seven or eight times in a circular pattern, injecting toxin-rich venom with each attack.

A fire ant sting causes instant redness, as well as pain and itching, which usually lasts no more than an hour. A few hours after the initial symptoms, the sting blisters and turns into a white pustule. The pustule can last between a few days and few weeks before drying up on its own. Fire ant bites can also cause general swelling around the sting, which usually lasts one to two days. In rare cases (less than 1 percent), people bitten by fire ants can experience anaphylaxis, a reaction that can be fatal. If you have any of these symptoms after a fire ant bite, see a health care provider immediately:

- Dizziness
- Nausea
- Severe sweating
- Slurred speech
- Severe chest pain
- Low blood pressure
- Swelling of the face or throat

Immediately after a sting, elevate the limb that was bitten and apply ice or a cold compress — this will help reduce swelling and pain. There is no treatment for the venom itself, but anti-itch medications, such as hydrocortisone cream and diphenhydramine, may bring you relief. Both creams are available over-the-counter (without a prescription) and can be used to treat the symptoms. Also, a solution of half-bleach and half-water applied immediately to the sting might help alleviate pain. Once the pustule has formed, it needs to be washed regularly and gently. In order to avoid a possible secondary infection, try not to break it.

To avoid future bites while you're in red ant territory, keep an eye out for anthills and consider wearing closed-toe shoes and socks. Covering your skin by wearing long pants, long sleeved
shirts, and gloves could provide some extra protection.

Good luck keeping the ants out of your pants!

Alice!
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