



University of North Carolina Wilmington
Abrons Student Health Center

INSTRUCTION SHEET: LOCAL REACTION TO FIRE ANT BITES

The Student Health Provider has diagnosed a mild allergic reaction to fire ant bites. Fortunately, fire ant bites most often cause only temporary swelling, redness, and discomfort at the bite sites. Rarely, a whole-body allergic reaction occurs; shock can result.

Usually, a tiny, fluid-filled blister forms at each bite site within a day or two; the fluid in the blisters may be clear or white. The blisters look much like chicken-pox blisters.

Realize that swelling and itching occur, even with treatment. Measures can be taken, however, to minimize the reaction.

MEASURES YOU SHOULD TAKE TO HELP TREAT YOUR FIRE ANT BITES:

1. Rest and elevate the affected body parts. Elevation helps minimize swelling and discomfort.
2. Take over-the-counter antihistamines: In the morning, take a non-sedating antihistamine such as loratadine, 10 mg daily. At night, take diphenhydramine (Benadryl), 25 mg, 1 or 2 every 6 hours for itching and swelling. The main side effect of diphenhydramine is drowsiness, so do not drive, operate machinery, climb a ladder, etc., while taking the medicine. Stop taking the antihistamines when the itching, redness, and swelling are gone.
3. Hydrocortisone cream, also available over-the-counter, can help decrease inflammation and itching of the bites. Rub a small dab of cream onto each bite two to three times a day.
4. If you have significant swelling, apply cold packs to the area off-and-on for the initial 24 hours. Cold helps reduce discomfort and swelling. Do not apply ice directly to the area, causing discomfort. Rather, aim for coolness, yet comfort, applying a layer or two of cloth between the cold pack and affected area.
5. Over-the-counter medications can help relieve discomfort associated with fire ant bites. Acetaminophen (Tylenol), ibuprofen, or naproxen can be taken, depending on individual preference.
6. Should symptoms of serious, whole-body allergic reaction occur (chances are very small), go *immediately* to the closest emergency department. Specifically, seek attention if you develop: whole-body rash and itching, difficulty breathing (wheezing, noise on breathing in), or become shocky (pale, sweaty, faint, lightheaded, confused).
7. Should you later develop signs of infection, return promptly to the Student Health Center or see another medical provider. Signs of infection include: pus draining from a bite site, increasing redness/swelling/warmth around the wound, or red streaks spreading from the wound.