



The Buzz on Bites and Stings

By Samuel Dunsiger

Last summer, a construction safety consultant with Safeline Management Systems Inc. was stung by a bee while working at a highrise building project in Toronto.

The consultant “noticed severe swelling around the sting, irritation and then dizziness,” reports Jason Radovski, field manager for the Toronto-based company.

The reaction is certainly not unheard of after being bitten or stung by bees, wasps, mosquitoes or ticks found buzzing about outdoors. That means these little critters can put at risk any workers whose jobs take them from inside to outside.

“This includes construction workers, farmers, park staff and wildlife staff,” says Jan Chappel, an occupational hygienist and senior technical specialist at the Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety (CCOHS) in Hamilton, Ontario. To the list, Karen Bartlett, an occupational hygienist and professor in the School of Population and Public Health at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, adds forestry workers, geologists, camp counsellors and tree planters.

Keith McMillan, national representative for the Ontario region of the Communications, Energy and Paperworkers’ Union of Canada, says there have been cases where once up a telephone pole — with nowhere else to go — telecommunications technicians have opened phone wiring boxes only to discover a bee or wasp nest inside.

“There is a risk of falling from a pole or ladder when swarmed by bees or wasps,” McMillan says. When not up a telephone pole, workers also deal with mosquitoes, ticks and spiders, just to name a few, he adds.

A bite or sting may also carry the potential for West Nile Virus (WNV) and Lyme disease. The CCOHS reports the effects of WNV, carried by infected mosquitoes, usually do not surface until three to 15 days following a bite; Lyme disease, caused by a bite from a bacteria-infected tick called *Borrelia burgdorferi*, can take three days to a month to develop.

Symptoms of WNV may include fever, headache and body ache; for Lyme disease, Chappel notes that “most often people will experience a mild illness that is sometimes accompanied by a peculiar skin rash. In some cases, however, the bacteria can spread to the joints, heart and brain, and cause serious health problems.”

WNV and Lyme disease cases are increasing, notes an email from the Public Health Agency of Canada in Ottawa. For Lyme disease, the provinces report about 150 cases annually (half contracted outside the country); for WNV, the agency had been informed of 102 cases (64 in Ontario and 38 in Quebec) from January through November last year.

Bartlett recommends getting schooled on the behaviour

of certain pests. “Ticks are pretty persistent,” she advises, but points out that it can take as long as 24 hours before they latch onto skin.

Noting that ticks are “usually waiting to strike in shrubs and tall grasslands,” she says it is important to do a tick check whenever leaving those areas. “If you do find one that is attached to your skin, use tweezers to grab the tick by its head and pull it straight out,” Bartlett recommends.

First aid at the scene may suffice for a sting or bite to an invulnerable area like an ankle, but a bite anywhere can carry serious consequences for someone who is allergic, Chappel says. “Sometimes there can be breathing difficulties or shock. If that’s the case, visit the hospital.”

Other hazards when working outdoors include Hantavirus, linked to white-footed deer mouse droppings and nests, and histoplasmosis, associated with bats, says Bartlett, which geologists, exploration workers and miners may encounter.

“There
can be
breathing
difficulties
or shock.”

ASSESS IS BEST

The key to minimizing bite- or sting-related risks is to be aware of work surroundings, advises Bruce Clarke, regional prevention manager for the Prince George region of Work-SafeBC. “It’s important to do a risk assessment of the area and what types of risks are occurring,” Clarke adds.

When addressing any hazard, Chappel says elimination is the best option. But when outdoors, “you can’t get rid of all insects everywhere,” she says. That necessitates bringing protective gear and administrative controls into the mix.

Among other things, Safeline Management Systems staff are provided insect repellent whenever they go into the field, Radovski says. “We identify insects to watch for, including black-flies and mosquitoes,” he notes. “We also go through emergency response plans to deal with allergic reactions.”

Bartlett suggests that workers wear long sleeves and pants to “make it less likely for [insects] to get under your skin.”

And it is best to keep things clean. Radovski says workers are advised to dump any standing water that might attract mosquitoes and Chappel recommends clearing away trash.

There are still employers and employees, however, who lack knowledge about potential risks, Clarke says.

Bartlett agrees. “I think we confuse outdoor workers with recreation. We tend to forget that we’re out there for long periods of time and that there are risks. We really need to change the consciousness that outdoor workers have about potential hazards and control measures.”

Enhanced awareness will never hurt. Consider that for the Safeline Management consultant, it was clear he had been stung; what was not so immediately evident was that he had a bee allergy. Medical attention was required immediately. **OHS**

Follow us on Twitter @OHSCanada 

Samuel Dunsiger is a writer in Toronto.