Common biting insects in the UK and how to tell them apart

The following is some information for people who find they are bitten by insects in The Royal Parks. In general, as insects are all around us, the best advice is to use a good insect repellent and have some anti-histamine to hand. But here is some more detailed information should you want it.

1. Mosquitoes

Mosquitoes can be found throughout the UK, which has 34 species, although not all will bite humans. They thrive in warm, damp conditions, as well as by areas of standing water such as lakes, pools, marshes and wetlands which offer perfect breeding conditions for them. Take care too near ditches, man-made lakes on golf courses and even near your eco-friendly water butt and the dog’s water bowl in the back yard. They are also particularly fond of warm grassy areas to hide in.

There are many species of mosquito which can vary in appearance. Most have:

- wings with a fringe-like border which are longer than its body
- hollow, straw-like extending mouthparts
- a hunched back appearance

Common symptoms of mosquito bites include soft bumps on the skin that may become pink, red, and very itchy. Note that these symptoms may occur up to 48 hours after the initial insect bite.

Symptoms of a more severe allergic reaction may include a large area of itching, lesions or bruises near the site of the insect bite.
How to avoid insect bites from mosquitoes

1. Buy and use a mosquito repellent from April through to October in the UK
2. Take extra care at dawn and dusk and near wooded areas, damp grassy spots and standing water
3. Cover up with cool, comfortable clothing whilst using a mosquito repellent on any exposed skin
4. Apply an even thin layer of mosquito repellent proven to protect against a range of mosquitoes and reapply if you’re perspiring, jumping in and out of a pool or using water pistols

2. Ticks

The UK already has a growing population of ticks well established in our countryside and rural areas as well as urban suburbs and towns. Experts have also warned they are on the increase. Areas with good vegetation, dense woodland and thick grass tend to be their habitat of choice, in addition to areas frequented by wildlife, deer and livestock. UK tick hotspots are reported to include the Highlands and Islands of Scotland, the New Forest, Exmoor, the South Downs, Thetford Forest, the Lake District and the North Yorkshire Moors.
Ticks are not actually insects but arachnids, part of the spider family. They can vary in colour from shades of brown and red, to black. To the naked eye the larvae (with 6 legs) look like specks of soot. With their eight legs, nymphs and adult ticks resemble small spiders. It is the nymph which is most likely to bite you, which may be no bigger than a poppy seed.

Ticks love warm, moist areas of the body such as the armpits or groin. Once a tick has found its way onto your body, and bitten into your skin it draws blood. Ticks normally remain attached to your body after they bite you meaning many people only realize they have been bitten by a tick after finding one still attached. After a period of several days or weeks of drawing blood from your body, an engorged tick can detach itself and fall off.

Tick bites are usually harmless and may produce no symptoms. However, if you are allergic to tick bites, you may experience pain or swelling at the bite site, a rash, burning sensation, blisters, or even difficulty breathing.

Lyme Disease is an uncommon risk of tick bites. Early symptoms of Lyme Disease can comprise a ‘bulls eye’ skin rash around the bite, and ‘flu-like’ symptoms such as headache, weakness, muscle pain, fever and exhaustion. Longer term, chronic effects can include memory loss, numbness and joint problems. It is important to seek medical advice and/or treatment early if you have been bitten by a tick and develop any of these symptoms.
Ticks do affect the Royal Parks, particularly where we have deer. There is a lot of information on the Royal Parks website about this and you can find it here:


**How to avoid bites from ticks**

1. Take extra care in wooded areas and dense undergrowth where ticks can thrive
2. Apply a thin, even layer of an effective repellent.
3. Cover up with long clothing especially on legs and arms and tuck trousers into socks.
4. Check yourself (and pets) carefully for ticks after being outdoors, especially warmer parts of your body, i.e. behind the knees
5. Remove any ticks carefully, as soon as possible with a tick-remover. Never compress the tick’s body or leave the mouthparts in the skin as this increases the chance of infection

**3. Midges**

Often travelling in packs, or swarms, midge bites don’t transmit illness but they’re often painful, itch intensely and can swell up alarmingly. It’s thought midges can home in on carbon dioxide sources from up to 200 metres away which helps them zoom in on their next meal.

The bane of the summer evening, midges feature throughout the UK. The Scottish Highlands in particular are known to be a midge magnet due to the climate and landscape. Midges tend to make an appearance on damp and cloudy summer days. They are big fans of wet ground such as near estuaries, marshes and tidal flats. They also love dense undergrowth and like their pals the pesky mosquitoes, they love dawn and dusk conditions.
Bites will often form as small lumps which are usually very itchy. You may also be able to see a small hole within the lump. If you’re particularly sensitive to insect bites, you may develop fluid-filled blisters or weals, surrounding the bite.

How to avoid insect bites from midges

1. Midges and gnats tend to attack in swarms, especially in hot weather, so use an insect repellent to avoid bites
2. Cover up at dawn and dusk in light coloured clothing, as dark clothing attracts them
3. Believe it or not midges can detect carbon dioxide in your breath 200 metres away so if you are doing any physically exerting activity such as hill walking always wear repellent and reapply if you are perspiring.

4. Stable Flies

Often confused with the common housefly, stable flies are also known as biting flies. However, unlike other flies, the stable fly sucks blood from mammals.

Stable flies are prevalent across the world, particularly around livestock and equine livery yards, where the animal manure and wet straw offer them the perfect breeding ground. Stable flies can also be found near the sea shore, and loitering near outdoor dog kennels. They tend to prefer the outside environment to indoors.
Stable flies can deliver a very painful bite which can sometimes feel like a needle. They can be extremely persistent and tend to attack around the ankles and lower legs.

**How to avoid stable fly bites**

1. If you’re a horse owner or working with livestock ensure to keep manure and wet straw to a minimum as stable flies breed in these environments
2. Buy and use a quality insect repellent to ward off bites

**5. Horse Flies**

These are large hairy little beasts and while they do not carry diseases, their bite can be very painful. They favour warm, sunny days to search for their next meal.

Adult horse flies are fast, strong fliers usually found around streams, marshes, and wooded areas. They are also very persistent meaning simply swatting them away does not work. They will be back! In fact many often give chase to their intended targets for a short time so be sure to use a good repellent for some added protection.

![Horse Fly](image)

They tend to attack the head and upper body with their bites. Their nips can prove very painful as their bite cuts the skin rather than piercing it. This is why horse fly bites can take longer to heal than other insect bites. This also means horse fly bites can easily become infected. As well as the formation of a weal around the bite, you may also experience a rash of weals (hives).
How to avoid insect bites from horse flies

1. Cover up well
2. Buy and use a proven insect repellent

6. Black Flies
Black flies are very tiny – about 2-6mm long and belong to a large family with over 1800 known species worldwide (about 34 in Britain). Most black flies gain nourishment by feeding on the blood of mammals or birds, including us, although the males feed mostly on nectar and other plant sugars.

They tend to feed in the daytime, normally when wind speeds are low. The Blandford fly (*Simulium posticatum*) in England was once a public health problem in the area around Blandford Forum, Dorset, due to its large numbers and the painful lesions caused by its bite.

In parts of Scotland, various species of black flies are a nuisance and bite humans, generally between May and September. They are found mainly in mixed birch and juniper woodlands, and at lower levels in pine forests, moorlands, and pastures.

Biting flies feed during daylight hours only and tend to zero in on areas of thinner skin, such as the nape of the neck or ears and ankles.
Bites are most often found on the head, neck, and back. They also frequently land on legs and arms too. Black fly bites tend to be shallow but sore as they use a cutting technique to bite your skin. You may not feel the bite at the time as they introduce an anticoagulant via their saliva, which also partially numbs the site of the bite.

Itching and inflammation can appear at the site of a bite and swelling can be quite pronounced depending on the species of black fly. Irritation can last for a number of weeks especially if it was a prolonged bite.

How to avoid black fly bites

1. Avoid areas inhabited by the flies
2. Avoiding peak biting times
3. Wear heavy-duty, light-coloured clothing, including long-sleeved shirts, long trousers and hats.
4. Yes…you guessed it, buy and wear an insect repellent proven to protect against these biters

If bitten by any insect, avoid scratching the bite, as this may introduce bacteria from your fingers or skin into the incision, which can lead to secondary infection. Insect or arachnid bites generally do not require antibiotic treatment unless this type of secondary infection occurs, as bacteria are not transmitted in the bite.