

Patient Update



Taking the Sting out of Summer

Although summer brings beach balls, suntans and picnics, the sunny season also brings something else: stinging insects.

Some people can be allergic to insect stings. An allergic reaction occurs when the immune system overreacts to the insect venom. When this happens, an allergic person's body produces an allergic substance called Immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibody, which reacts with the insect venom. This triggers the release of histamine and other chemicals that cause allergic symptoms.

The individual may not experience a severe allergic reaction from that first sting—but if he or she is stung again by the same or similar species, the insect venom interacts with the IgE antibody produced in response to the earlier sting.

In the most severe of cases, there can be a rapid fall in blood pressure which can result in the loss of consciousness, which can lead to death. Insect stings must be taken seriously.

It's important to know what these insects look like and where they live. Most sting reactions are caused by five types of insects:

- **Yellow Jackets:** These are black with yellow markings, found in various climates. Their

nests are usually located underground, but sometimes found in the walls of buildings, cracks in masonry or woodpiles.

- **Honeybees:** They have a round, fuzzy body with dark brown and yellow markings. This bee will leave its stinger in its victim and the bee dies as a result. These are usually nonaggressive, stinging when provoked, except for their more aggressive cousin in the southwest. They can be found in honeycombs in trees, old tires, or other partially protected sites.

- **Paper wasps:** These are slender with black, brown, red and yellow markings. They live in a circular comb under eaves, behind shutters or in shrubs and woodpiles.

- **Hornets:** These are black or brown with white, orange or yellow markings. Their nests are gray or brown and usually found in trees.

- **Fire ants:** These are reddish brown ants living in large mounds, mostly in warmer climates. They can attack with little warning, inserting highly concentrated toxins, causing burning pain.

Avoiding the Ouch

Prevention is a good treatment for stinging insect allergies. Follow these steps to help protect yourself from being stung:

- Stay out of the "territory" of stinging insects' nests.

- If you encounter flying insects, remain calm and quiet, and move slowly. Do not "swat" them.

- Many stinging insects are searching for nectar, so don't look or smell like a flower - avoid brightly colored clothing and perfume when outdoors.

- Be careful when cooking, eating or drinking sweet drinks like soda or juice outdoors - the smell of food attracts insects. Keep food covered until eaten.

Venom immunotherapy, or allergy shots, are proven to be 90% effective. This is a treatment that will help prevent serious outbreaks when you are stung. Your allergist/immunologist can determine if this is the right step for you.



BZZZZ.....BEE Prepared!

Severe allergic reactions to insect stings can involve many body organs and may develop rapidly. This reaction is called anaphylaxis. Symptoms of anaphylaxis can include:

- Itching and hives over large areas of the body

- Swelling in the throat or tongue
- Difficulty breathing
- Dizziness
- Stomach cramps
- Nausea or diarrhea

For more information on stinging insect allergy, visit the Patients and Consumers Center of the AAAAI's Web site, www.aaaai.org.

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