

Patient Education OUCH!

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Everyone will react in some way to the venom of stinging insects, but up to 13.5 million people in the U.S. may be at risk of anaphylaxis¹. Protect yourself and your family by becoming familiar with the types of reactions and what action to take in the event someone is stung.

Types Of Stinging Reactions

The severity of an insect sting reaction varies from person to person. There is no predictor of an allergic reaction—even people with no other allergies or no previous reaction to stings can have serious allergic reactions. Those who have experienced a previous severe systemic reaction are at greatest risk for future reactions.

Non-Allergic Reaction

Local Reaction: Most people will react to an insect sting in this way. A normal reaction will result in pain, swelling and redness confined to the sting site. Simply disinfect the area, apply ice to reduce the swelling, and take an antihistamine to control itching.

Allergic Reaction

Large Local Reaction: A large local reaction will result in swelling, redness and hives that are confined to the general area of the sting. For example, a person stung on the forearm may experience significant swelling of their entire arm. Notify your doctor immediately. This condition may persist for 2-3 days and antihistamines and steroids are sometimes prescribed to lessen discomfort. Large local reactions can indicate that a more serious reaction may occur in the future.

Systemic Reaction: A systemic reaction is an allergic reaction that will set off symptoms in other parts of the body, outside of the sting site. Symptoms of a systemic reaction include itching, rash, hives, joint swelling, and inflammation at or around the site of the sting or bite. Systemic reactions can sometimes progress to anaphylaxis. Seek immediate medical attention.

Anaphylaxis: Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening allergic reaction that spreads quickly through the body. Symptoms may include hives, itching or swelling in areas other than the sting site, tightness in the chest and difficulty breathing, hoarse voice or swelling of the tongue, dizziness or a sharp drop in blood pressure, unconsciousness or cardiac arrest. This reaction can occur within 1-2 minutes after the sting and can be fatal. If you have auto-injectable epinephrine, use it immediately. Then seek emergency medical attention.

Avoidance Tips

The majority of insect stings in the U.S. come from yellow jackets, hornets, wasps, bees and fire ants. These insects live throughout the U.S. except for fire ants which are found only in the Southeastern states. You can lessen your chances of an insect sting by taking precautionary measures during the summer and fall months when stinging insects are most active and nest populations can exceed 60,000 insects.

1. Never walk barefoot in the grass.
2. Avoid insect attractants such as fragrances, perfumes, hairsprays, lotions, etc.
3. Avoid wearing bright colored clothing.
4. Use caution and learn to recognize stinging insects and their nesting and eating habits in order to avoid them.

Top 5 Stinging Insects



Hornets: The inch-long hornet builds one of the easiest insect nests to recognize. Brown or grey in color, its football-shaped nest can be found high above ground level in bushes, trees and under eaves of buildings. Located throughout North America, the hornet is extremely protective and may sting repeatedly when felt threatened.



Yellow Jackets: The yellow jacket builds papery nests underground or in walls or woodpiles. Found worldwide, this persistent pest is not easily provoked but is highly aggressive—particularly as weather cools in the late summer or early fall. Yellow jackets will use their stinger more than once when provoked.



Wasps: The wasp's elongated inch-long body can be black, brown or red with yellow markings. Its nests are found throughout North America around the exterior of buildings, woodpiles and shrubs. The wasp is aggressive and can sting more than once.



Honey Bees: This industrious flying insect has a round, hairy dark brown body and bright yellow markings. It nests in hives built in protected areas such as holes in the ground, building cavities, old tires, beekeeper boxes and even bushes. The honey bee can be found around the globe. They are not terribly aggressive and typically sting only when challenged directly. Its one-time sting causes the honey bee to lose its stinger and then die.



Fire Ants: Usually a quarter-inch long and ranging in color from bright reddish brown to dark brown or black, this stinging insect nests in mounds up to 18 inches high and 3 feet wide above the ground (which covers underground tunnels). The fire ant can be found as far north as Nevada in the West and Washington, DC, in the East. It is very territorial and will attack in swarms with little warning or provocation. Stinging up to 7 or 8 times, the fire ant's attack can cause burning, itching and pustules (pimple-like bumps).

What To Do If Stung

1. Calmly brush the insect away and leave the area.
2. If the stinger remains in the skin, remove it by flicking your fingers at it or by scraping it off with a flat surface like a credit card.
Do NOT use tweezers!
3. Apply cold compress to reduce swelling.
4. Watch for any of the following symptoms that could indicate an allergic reaction requiring immediate medical attention:
 - a. Itching, hives or swelling in areas other than the sting site
 - b. Tightness in the chest or difficulty breathing
 - c. Hoarse voice or swelling of the throat or tongue
 - d. Dizziness or confusion
 - e. Severe headache
 - f. Stomach cramps, nausea, vomiting or diarrhea
 - g. Shock, unconsciousness or cardiac arrest
5. If you have been prescribed an epinephrine autoinjector, use it immediately and seek immediate medical attention.
6. See an allergist for testing and to discuss treatment options.

See An Allergist

Anyone who has experienced an allergic reaction in the past has a 65% chance of a similar or worse reaction if stung again². If you have experienced an allergic reaction of any kind, consult an Allergist as soon as possible. An Allergist will give you an allergy skin test to determine which insects you are allergic to and may suggest immunotherapy. Venom Immunotherapy treatment involves doses of venom that will stimulate your immune system to become resistant to a future reaction. See an Allergist for treatment options that can reduce your risk of future reactions. After consultation with an Allergist, many patients have been placed on Venom Immunotherapy (allergy shots). Discuss the benefits and risks with an Allergist to determine if you are a candidate for Venom Immunotherapy.

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¹Golden DB, et al. JAMA 1989.; ²Golden DB. Ann Allergy Immunol. 2006.

Warnings and Indications for Venom Allergy Extracts

Venom allergy extracts are indicated for use in the diagnosis and treatment of allergies to certain stinging insects. Severe anaphylactic reactions to this extract can occur in extremely allergic patients and at any dose level. Please read and understand the Warnings and Precautions sections of the prescribing information provided.