

Insect Allergies

For most people an insect sting will cause redness, swelling and itching around the sting site. But some people's immune systems overreact to the sting, causing an allergic reaction. For a small number of people, the stings cause a life-threatening reaction called anaphylaxis. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include two or more of the following:

- itching and hives
- swelling in the throat or tongue
- trouble breathing
- dizziness
- stomach cramps
- nausea, throwing up, or diarrhea
- fall in blood pressure, which can result in shock and passing out

Anaphylaxis needs to be treated immediately by paramedics who will take the patient to an emergency room.

If someone has an allergic reaction to an insect sting, they need to be tested to find out which insect stung them. It is often hard to tell which insect stung you at the time it happened. Some people may be allergic to more than one kind of insect.

- Yellow jackets nests are made of a paper like material, and are usually located underground, or sometimes in walls of buildings, cracks in bricks, or woodpiles.
- Honeybees and bumble bees are not aggressive and will only sting when angry. They either live in hives or hollow trees.
- Paper wasp nests are usually made of a paper-like material which opens downward, often found under eaves, behind shutters, or in shrubs or woodpiles.
- Hornets are usually bigger than yellow jackets. Their nests are made of a paper material and are found high up in trees or on roofs.
- Fire ants build nests that look like tall mounds of dirt. The nests can be up to 18 inches tall.

Preventing Stings

- Stay away! If you find a nest, don't disturb it. Hire a professional to remove it.
- If flying stinging insects are close by, stay calm and move slowly away.
- Don't wear bright colors or perfume when outdoors.
- Insects like the smell of food so be careful when eating or drinking outside. Watch out for insects inside straws or canned drinks. Keep food covered until eaten.
- Wear closed-toe shoes outdoors and don't go barefoot.
- Don't wear loose-fitting clothes that can trap insects between material and skin.

Treating Stings

Get away from the insect.

If the insect left its stinger in your skin, take it out by using your fingernail or a credit card. Try to take out both the stinger and sac by scraping it at the level of the skin. Don't squeeze the sac!

These steps can help in treating local reactions to insect stings:

- Put a cold compress on the area that was stung
- Elevate the area that was stung
- Gently wash the area that was stung with soap and water to help keep it from getting infected
- Use steroid creams or take an antihistamine to help stop the itching.
- See your doctor if the swelling gets worse or the sting looks like it's infected.

If you have severe reactions to stings (anaphylaxis in a child) you should always have auto-injectable epinephrine (shot) device and an antihistamine with you. Your doctor will show you how to use the epinephrine shot device. Make sure to get a new shot device when it expires. If you use the epinephrine shot for a reaction, you must call 911 immediately to take you to an emergency room.

Those with severe allergies should wear a bracelet or necklace that identifies the severe allergy.

Allergy shots to insect venom can be used in patients who have severe insect allergies; evaluation with an allergist can help determine if your child will benefit from these.