



## Insect Stings

Most people are not allergic to insect stings and should recognize the difference between an allergic reaction and a normal reaction. This will reduce anxiety and prevent unnecessary medical expense.

### **What is a Normal Reaction to an Insect Sting? What is the Recommended Treatment?**

The severity of an insect sting reaction varies from person to person. A normal reaction will result in pain, swelling and redness confined to the sting site. Simply disinfect the area (washing with soap and water will do) and apply ice to reduce swelling.

A large local reaction will result in swelling that extends beyond the sting site. For example, a sting on the forearm could result in the entire arm swelling twice its normal size. Although alarming in appearance, this condition is often treated the same as a normal reaction. However, because this condition may persist for two to three days, antihistamines and corticosteroids are sometimes prescribed to lessen the discomfort. A large local reaction requires allergy evaluation as some large local reactions may indicate a more severe and systemic reaction is likely with future stings.

**Yellow jackets, hornets and wasps can sting repeatedly.** Honeybees have barbed stingers which are left behind in their victim's skin. These stingers are best removed by a scraping action, rather than a pulling motion which may actually squeeze more venom into the skin.

### **What are the Symptoms of Insect Sting Allergy?**

The most serious reaction to an insect sting is anaphylaxis. This condition requires immediate medical attention. Symptoms of an allergic reaction may include one or more of the following:

- Hives, itching and swelling in areas other than the sting site.
- Tightness in the chest and difficulty breathing.
- Hoarse voice or swelling of the tongue.

A severe allergic reaction, or anaphylaxis, can occur within minutes after the sting and may be life threatening. Symptoms may include:

- Dizziness or a sharp drop in blood pressure
- Unconsciousness or cardiac arrest

People who have experienced an allergic reaction to an insect sting have a 60% chance of a similar or worse reaction if stung again.

### **How Are Allergic Reactions to Insect Stings Treated?**

Insect sting allergy is treated in a two-step approach. The first step is emergency treatment of the symptoms of a serious reaction. The second step is preventive treatment of the underlying allergy with venom immunotherapy. Life-threatening allergic reactions can progress very rapidly and require immediate medical attention.

Emergency treatment usually includes administration of certain drugs, such as epinephrine, antihistamines, and in some cases, corticosteroids, intravenous fluids, oxygen and other treatments.

Once stabilized, patients are sometimes required to stay overnight at the hospital under close observation.

Injectable epinephrine for self-administration is often prescribed as emergency rescue medication for treating an allergic reaction. People who have had previous allergic reactions and rely on epinephrine must remember to carry it with them at all times. Also, because one dose may not be enough to reverse the reaction, immediate medical attention following an insect sting is essential.

### **What is Venom Immunotherapy?**

The long-term treatment of insect sting allergy is called Venom Immunotherapy. It is a highly effective program of weekly injections, administered by your Allergist. Venom Immunotherapy is the only treatment which has been proven to prevent further allergic reactions to insect stings.

Venom immunotherapy involves administering gradually increasing doses of venom which stimulate the patient's own immune system to reduce the risk of a future allergic reaction to the same as the general population. In a matter of weeks to months, people who previously lived under the constant threat of severe reactions to insect stings can return to leading normal lives.

### **How Can I Avoid Insect Stings?**

Knowing how to avoid stings from fire ants, bees, wasps, hornets and yellow jackets can lead to a more enjoyable summer for everyone. Stinging insects are most active during the summer and early fall, when nest populations can exceed 60,000 insects. Insect repellents do not work against stinging insects.

Yellow jackets will nest in the ground and in walls. Hornets and wasps will nest in bushes, trees and on buildings. Use extreme caution when working or playing in these areas. Avoid open garbage cans and exposed food at picnics. Also, try to reduce the amount of exposed skin when outdoors.

### **Your Allergist Recommends the Following Additional Precautions to Avoid Insect Stings:**

- Avoid wearing sandals or walking barefoot in the grass. Honeybees and bumblebees forage on white clover, a weed that grows in lawns throughout the country.
- Never swat at a flying insect. If need be, gently brush it aside or patiently wait for it to leave.
- Do not drink from open beverage cans. Stinging insects will crawl inside a can attracted by the sweet beverage.
- When eating outdoors, try to keep food covered at all times.
- Garbage cans stored outside should be covered with tight-fitting lids.
- Avoid sweet-smelling perfumes, hair sprays, colognes and deodorants.
- Avoid wearing bright-colored clothing.
- Wear long sleeved garments as often as possible.
- Yard work and gardening should be done with caution.
- Keep window and door screens in good repair.
- Drive with car windows closed.
- Keep prescribed medications handy at all times and follow the attached instructions if you are stung. These medications are for immediate emergency use while en route to a hospital emergency room for observation and further treatment.
- If you have had an allergic reaction to an insect sting, it's important that you see your Allergist.

If you have questions about insect stings, feel free to contact our office. One of our staff would be happy to answer your questions and discuss different treatment options offered at Allergy & Asthma Clinics of Ohio.