

Dealing with insect stings

Stings from flying insects are annoying to everyone and life-threatening for a few of us. Here are some tips for avoiding stings—and advice on what steps to take if you do tangle with a honeybee, yellow jacket, hornet, wasp, or fire ant.

Stopping stings

To help prevent stings, don't wear perfume or perfumed creams or lotions outdoors. Avoid wearing bright colors; khaki seems to attract the fewest insects. Do not walk barefoot in grass or clover, and be especially wary around food outdoors. Don't drink from an unattended soda can without checking to see if a thirsty yellow jacket has crawled inside.

Bug repellents are all more or less equally effective. If you react severely to stings, however, do not rely on bug repellents for protection.

Minor stings

A normal reaction to a sting consists of redness, itching, mild pain, and swelling at the sting site. If you are stung and react in this manner, you can probably manage without help from your physician.

- Apply ice to reduce swelling.
- If itching is particularly bothersome, try using an over-the-counter anti-itch cream or an antihistamine
- If places on your body other than the sting site swell, or if any other symptoms occur, call your physician for additional treatment and to determine if you are allergic.

Emergency medical help

If you've experienced difficulty breathing or swallowing, or if you've felt dizzy or passed out, you may need an injection with a substance called epi-

White-faced hornet



Honeybee



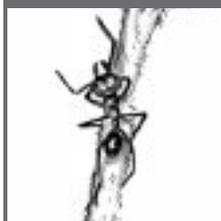
Paper wasp



Bumblebee



Fire ant



nephrine. Depending on the severity of your symptoms, your physician may recommend that from now on you carry with you an epinephrine kit so that you can inject yourself immediately after being stung and before your symptoms become severe. If your physician makes this recommendation, be sure you understand how to use the kit and feel completely comfortable doing so before you leave the office. Do not store kits in places that are subject to extreme light or heat, such as glove compartments. Be sure to check the expiration date on the kit occasionally and replace it if necessary, even if you have not used it.

Venom immunotherapy

Your physician may also recommend that you visit an allergist to learn more about your allergy. If you are the type of person who spends a good deal of time outdoors and reacts severely to stings, then the allergist may recommend that you receive venom immunotherapy, also sometimes called allergy shots.

Venom immunotherapy involves injections of very small amounts of the insect venom every 4 to 6 weeks for at least 3 to 5 years. Eventually, your body becomes immune to the venom and no longer reacts if you are stung. Therapy is almost 100% effective. While most people can stop therapy after about 5 years and remain immune, those who have reacted severely may need to continue treatment indefinitely. Venom immunotherapy takes a few months to become effective, so your physician and allergist may recommend that you carry an epinephrine kit in case you get stung during this time.