

Patient Update



There's a buzz in the air

September through October is prime stinging insect season. It is important for people who have severe allergic reactions to insect stings to take precautions.

Up to 5% of Americans are at risk for a severe, potentially life-threatening allergic reaction from stinging insects called anaphylaxis. Unfortunately, most people are not aware that they are allergic to insect stings until after they experience a reaction.

People who are allergic to insect stings have immune systems that overreact to the venom injected by the insect. After the first sting, the allergic person's body produces an allergic substance called Immunoglobulin E (IgE) antibody, that reacts with the insect venom. If he or she is stung again by an insect of the same or similar species, the insect venom interacts with the IgE antibody produced in response to the earlier sting. This triggers the release of histamine and other chemicals that cause allergic symptoms.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis

- Itching and hives over large areas of the body
- Swelling in the throat or tongue
- Difficulty breathing
- Dizziness
- Stomach cramps
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- In severe cases, a rapid fall in blood pressure may result in shock and loss of consciousness.

Anaphylaxis is a medical emergency and may be fatal. If you or anyone else experiences any of these symptoms after an insect sting, call 911 to get emergency medical treatment immediately. After your symptoms are treated, contact your allergist/immunologist to learn about treatment options.

Preventing stings

The most common insects that cause a reaction are:

- Yellow Jackets
- Honey Bees
- Paper Wasps
- Hornets
- Fire Ants

You can take other steps to keep from being stung when encountering flying stinging insects, such as:

- Avoid the "territory" of the stinging insects' nests. These insects are most likely to sting if their homes are disturbed, so it is important to have hives and nests around your home destroyed. Since this activity can be dangerous, hire a trained exterminator.
- Remain calm and quiet, and move slowly away from them.
- Avoid brightly colored clothing and perfume when outdoors. Many stinging insects are searching for food and could confuse you with a flower.
- Be careful when cooking, eating, or drinking sweet drinks like soda or juice outdoors. Keep food covered until eaten.
- Wear closed-toe shoes outdoors and avoid going barefoot.
- Avoid loose-fitting garments that can trap insects between material and skin.

People who have severe allergies to insect venom should consider receiving insect venom immunotherapy, a highly effective vaccination program that actually prevents future allergic sting reactions in 97% of treated patients. During venom immunotherapy, the allergist/immunologist administers gradually stronger doses of venom extract on a weekly basis, but as maintenance doses are reached, the interval may sometimes be expanded to one month or more.



If you have questions about venom immunotherapy or other treatments for stinging insect allergy, be sure to ask your allergist/immunologist. Patients who receive appropriate treatment such as immunotherapy and practice careful avoidance measures, can participate in regular outdoor activities.

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