

“Bee” careful of stinging insects this fall

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September marks the beginning of stinging insect season, which usually runs through October. It is extremely important for people who are severely allergic to insect stings to take precautions any time of year.

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 difficulty breathing, itching, nausea, diarrhea, or any other symptoms of anaphylaxis.

When an allergic person is stung, their immune system produces Immunoglobulin E (IgE) which reacts to the venom injected by the insect. This triggers the release of histamine and other chemicals causing severe allergic symptoms such as:

- Itching and hives all over the body
- Swelling in the throat or tongue
- Difficulty breathing
- Stomach cramps
- Nausea
- Diarrhea
- Rapid fall in blood pressure, resulting in shock and loss of consciousness (severe cases)

Before the sting

It is important to take precautions before being stung to help avoid a potentially dangerous reaction:

- Be aware of the most common stinging insects in the United States, including yellow jackets, honeybees, bumblebees, paper wasps, hornets and fire ants.
- If you have experienced a severe reaction to insect stings or you think you may be allergic, consult with an allergist/immunologist to accurately diagnose your condition. An allergist/immunologist is the best qualified medical professional trained to manage the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of allergies and asthma.
- Consider allergy shots, also known as immunotherapy treatment. Venom immunotherapy shots take effect within just a few months. Venom immunotherapy is the closest thing to a “cure” for allergic reactions.

Preventing the sting

The following are steps that can be taken to keep from being stung when encountering flying stinging insects:

- Avoid the “territory” of the stinging insect’s nest. 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 slowly move away.
- 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 beverages 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.

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 treatment options.