



## Honeybee and Other Insect Stings

Honeybees and yellow jackets are the most common stinging insects in Illinois. Others include hornets, bumblebees, fire ants and wasps. Although honeybees sting only once, leaving a stinger imbedded in the skin, the others can sting again and again. Yellow jacket season comes in late summer and early fall. Fire ants are typically more active in southern Illinois and are most active during warm, damp weather as in spring and fall.

When a person is stung by these insects, reactions may be local or allergic. Local reactions such as redness, swelling, pain, and itching are a result of the tissue damage caused by the venom (poison) injected into the site. Swelling is often worse on the second day as the local allergic reaction further evolves. Medical care is not generally required for local reactions. However, if it has been more than ten years since your last tetanus immunization, contact your provider for a booster.

Systemic or allergic reactions including hives, difficulty breathing, swelling of the mouth/throat, nausea, or fainting occur in persons whose immune systems are overly sensitive to the venom. If you suspect that someone is having a generalized allergic reaction, apply ice to the bite and seek medical care immediately. If the person has an emergency Epinephrine Kit, administer it. Do not try to drive yourself to the hospital, as you may lose consciousness and have an accident or not reach the hospital. Call 911 (on campus, 9-911)

### **Stings hurt, but there are things you can do that can help**

Here are some things to do:

- If stung by a bee, gently scrape away the stinger using your fingernail. Do not use tweezers or fingers to pull out the stinger as this may inject more venom.
- Avoid scratching the area to limit the chance of infection.
- If the area blisters, do not break the blister.
- Symptoms can be minimized with local intermittent icing to minimize swelling and pain.
- Taking an antihistamine like Benadryl (diphenhydramine), can minimize itching and swelling, but it may make you drowsy.
- Use an over-the-counter pain medication such as ibuprofen or acetaminophen as needed.
- Hydrocortisone cream can reduce swelling and itching.
- Keep the skin clean with soap and water.
- Antibiotics are not useful for treating stings and they do not prevent secondary infections. It's okay to use an antibiotic ointment, but not necessary.
- It may take several days for the swelling to go down.

Local reactions do not represent infections. Although deep infections secondary to sting-induced tissue damage is uncommon, they are possible. Fever, pus or painful swelling can be signs of an infection. If these symptoms develop, seek medical care.

### **People who have had a severe, systemic allergic reaction need to carry emergency medication**

Severely allergic people should carry a syringe of epinephrine with them for self-injection in case they are stung. Epinephrine is available by prescription only. It can be dangerous for some people, so it's definitely something to discuss with your provider if you think you have a severe allergy.

### **Desensitization can be very effective for some people**

Some people with bee or yellow jacket hypersensitivity will choose to work with an allergist on desensitization. Desensitization with a series of allergy shots can be very effective.

## **Prevention is the best policy**

Stinging insects are attracted to bright colors and to some scents. Avoid wearing bright clothes, perfumes, aftershave lotions, colognes and using scented soaps.

In addition:

- Don't go barefoot (some bees nest in the ground).
- Wear clean clothing and bathe daily (sweat angers bees).
- Avoid watering plants.
- Don't swat or otherwise provoke bees, wasps, or hornets with your bare hands.
- Make sure there are no insects soaking up the moisture in damp beach towels before you use them.
- Keep food covered. Be very careful drinking from open containers, especially sweetened drinks.

## **“BEE Alert”**

Stinging insects play a vital part in our environment and economy. When we confuse them with our bright colors, sweet scents and sources of nourishment, they are attracted to our surroundings and to us. When we threaten them, they aggressively protect themselves and their hives. They are very unlikely to sting until they perceive a threat. Our best protection is not to poison or bait, but to respect their habits. By giving them the wide berth that they deserve; it is unlikely that these insects will sting.

## **References**

About fire ants. From the No Fire Ants Web site

Cry, D., L. & Johnson, S., B (2006). National Ag Safety Database found at the CDC Web site

Stoppler, M., C., (2006) Bee Sting Treatment from the Medicine Net Web site

University of Wisconsin Madison Web site, Emedicine Web site, search for insect stings

If you are a registered University of Illinois student and you have questions or concerns, or need to make an appointment, please call: **Dial-A-Nurse at 333-2700**

If you are concerned about any difference in your treatment plan and the information in this handout, you are advised to contact your health care provider.

Visit the McKinley Health Center Web site at: <http://www.mckinley.illinois.edu>