

Patient Information:

Stinging Insect Allergy- Hornets, Yellow Jackets, Wasps and Bees



Millions of Americans are stung by insects every year.

Everyone will react in some way to the venom of stinging insects, but up to 13.5 million people in the U.S. may be at risk of a serious allergic reaction¹.



Types of Insect Sting Reactions

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 and apply ice to reduce swelling. A **large local reaction** will result in swelling that extends beyond the sting site. For example, a person stung on the forearm may have his/her entire arm swell to 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 2-3 days, antihistamines and steroids are sometimes prescribed to lessen discomfort. The most serious reaction to an insect sting is an **allergic reaction**. This condition requires immediate medical attention.

Symptoms of an allergic reaction or “anaphylaxis” may include any of the following:

- Hives, itching or swelling in areas other than the sting site
- Tightness in the chest and difficulty breathing
- Hoarse voice or swelling of the tongue
- Dizziness or a sharp drop in blood pressure
- Unconsciousness or cardiac arrest

This type of reaction can occur within minutes after the sting and may be life-threatening or even fatal. Anyone who has experienced an allergic reaction to an insect sting in the past has a 65% chance of a similar or worse reaction if stung again.²



Treating Allergic Reactions

An allergic reaction is treated with epinephrine, either self-injected or administered by a doctor. In some cases, intravenous fluids, oxygen and other treatments are necessary as well. Once stabilized, these patients are sometimes required to stay overnight at the hospital under close supervision. People who have had previous reactions and rely on the protection of epinephrine must remember to carry it with them at all times. Also, because one dose may be insufficient in reversing a reaction, immediate medical attention following an insect sting is recommended.

Avoidance

You can lessen your chances of an insect sting by taking certain precautionary measures. Yellow jackets will nest in the ground and in walls. Hornets will nest in bushes and in trees. Use extreme caution when working or playing in these areas and never walk barefoot in the lawn. Avoid insect attractants such as fragrances, perfumes, hairspray, lotions, etc. Avoid open garbage cans and exposed food at picnics. Also, try to reduce the amount of exposed skin when outdoors.



Preventing Allergic Reactions

Systemic reactions to insect stings have been shown to be reduced following a complete course of Venom Immunotherapy. In clinical studies systemic reactions were reduced up to 97% in patients treated with insect venom protein extracts. It involved administering gradually increasing doses of venom which stimulates the patient's own immune system to become resistant to a future allergic reaction. Over time, people who previously lived under the constant threat of severe reactions to insect stings may go about leading normal lives. IT is not without risks. Possible side effects may include: itching and redness at the site of injection, local swelling and

soreness 8-12 hours after injection. Although these local reactions may produce discomfort, they are not serious. Serious systemic reactions can occur, but they are rare.

Learn More about Immunotherapy

Consult an Allergy Specialist. If you experience allergic symptoms, it is important to talk to a doctor who specializes in the diagnosis and treatment of allergic diseases. Based on your past history and specific testing, your Allergy Specialist will be able to determine if you are a candidate for IT treatment.

Conclusion

Most people are not allergic to insect stings and should recognize the difference between an allergic reaction and a normal or large local reaction. This will prevent unnecessary worry and medical expense. People who are allergic to insect stings should be evaluated by an Allergy Specialist for correct diagnosis and treatment of their allergic condition. Although stinging insect allergy is a serious problem, much of the risk and fear of a reoccurrence may be eliminated with IT.

Warnings and Indications for Allergen Immunotherapy (IT)

Hyposensitization therapy is a treatment for patients exhibiting allergic reactions to the venom of stinging insects such as bees, wasps, yellow jackets and hornets. Prior to initiation of therapy, the clinical sensitivity should be established by careful evaluation of the patient's history confirmed by diagnostic skin testing. Hyposensitization should not be prescribed for sensitivities to allergens which can easily be avoided. As with all allergenic extracts, severe system reactions may occur. In certain individuals, these life-threatening reactions may be fatal.



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¹ Golden DB, et al. JAMA 1989.

² Golden DB. Ann Allergy Immunol. 2006.