

Spring Bees: What can be done for allergic reactions to stinging insects?

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As our weather warms up, we know that we face another spring that is sure to be accompanied by high levels of tree pollen in the air. However, pollen will not be the only potential allergen that we will face. Stinging insect hypersensitivity associated with severe reactions affects approximately 5 percent of the population with approximately 40 deaths per year in the United States. Reactions can be mild and limited to localized swelling and redness at the site of the insect sting or can be severe and accompanied by life threatening anaphylaxis. Insects that are known to cause such reactions include honeybees, bumblebees, hornets, wasps, yellow jackets, and fire ants (less of a problem in Colorado).

Symptoms that one might experience after a sting may include localized redness, pain and burning that is limited to only the site of the sting. Fortunately, the majority of individuals with these localized reactions usually do not have systemic anaphylaxis with future stings. Others may experience more serious reactions after a sting. The symptoms of a more serious reaction may include diffuse urticaria (hives), flushing, swelling of the lips, eyes, or tongue, wheezing or difficulty breathing, low blood pressure, lightheadedness, loss of consciousness, and even death. The risk of a systemic reaction if one has previously experienced a systemic reaction to a stinging insect is approximately 60%.

What can be done for such reactions to stinging insects? Usually for localized reactions, treatment with cleansing the site, antihistamines, topical steroids, ice and removal of a stinger if present may be all that is required. If symptoms persist, one should seek medical care. However, for reactions that are more than localized, immediate medical attention should be sought and further testing is recommended. Immediate treatment for systemic reactions includes immediate medical care, epinephrine and antihistamines. For children, reactions that lead to swelling of the lips, eyes, throat or tongue, wheezing or difficulty breathing, low blood pressure, lightheadedness or loss of consciousness should be further investigated by an allergist. These kids should have self injectable epinephrine available and may be candidates for allergen immunotherapy. For adults, any symptoms beyond a localized reaction should have a self injectable epinephrine pen available and should have further investigation by an allergist for possible allergen immunotherapy. Allergen immunotherapy has great advantages for individuals with serious reactions to stinging insects. It has been shown to reduce the risk of systemic reactions to future insect stings to less than 3%.

If you or someone you know has stinging insect hypersensitivity and would like further information and possible treatment, please contact us.