

## Venomous Insect Allergy

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June 17, 2003



### General Information

Reactions to insect venom cause about 50 deaths yearly in the United States. Most people report that insect stings produce itching, pain, redness and mild swelling at the site of the sting. These symptoms usually last hours but may last several days. For others, the reaction can develop into systemic symptoms and a life-threatening emergency called anaphylactic shock. The symptoms of anaphylactic shock can include: hives, throat tightness, shortness of breath, cough, wheezing, dizziness, low blood pressure, fainting and unconsciousness. If someone experiences any of these symptoms they must seek medical treatment and follow up with an allergist for further diagnosis and treatment.

The risk of a systemic reaction is less than 5% in the total population. The risk of a systemic reaction if you have had one previously is 60-70%. Venom immunotherapy has been shown to be highly effective in lowering the risk of systemic reactions to future insect stings for these individuals who are sensitized. Patients who have had a previous systemic reaction to an insect sting should see an allergist for testing to help determine the risk of an anaphylactic reaction with future stings and to provide information for the venom immunotherapy.

### Treatment

The immediate treatment of a local reaction should be cleansing the site and then ice or cold compresses for several hours. Antihistamines and topical steroids can help reduce the itching and local discomfort. If symptoms persist you should seek medical care.

Treatment for a systemic reaction includes taking an antihistamine and seeking immediate medical treatment. After the initial sting the patient must be given an epi-pen (epinephrine). If a patient needs to use the epi-pen they still must seek immediate medical care as additional treatment is often necessary and 20% of patients will develop delayed symptoms.



### To Limit the Risk of Insect Stings

- The risk increases in summer and with outdoor exposure.
- Be careful when doing yard work, handling garbage, picnicking, swimming, bicycling, riding in open-air vehicles, boating, camping, or other outdoor activity.
- Always wear shoes outdoors.

- Avoid eating and drinking outdoors; including drinking from a can and outdoor areas where there are food or trash receptacles.
- Avoid loose-fitting clothing (may entrap insects).
- Do not look or smell like a flower; insects are attracted to bright colors, floral patterns, and scents.
- Wear light-colored clothing; white, green, tan and khaki. Do not wear scented perfumes, lotions, soaps colognes, or hair preparations.
- Keep windows closed when driving and check for insects before entering vehicle.
- Most insects will not sting unless provoked therefore remain still and avoid jerking movement.
- Any nest or hive around the home should be removed by a professional.
- Insect repellants should not be depended on for protection as they do not seem to deter stinging insects.
- Wear an identification tag or bracelet at all times.
- Immunotherapy does not lessen the need for avoidance measures.
- Have an emergency kit with epinephrine available at all times and instruct family members and companions in its use.
- Seek medical attention immediately after emergency treatment is given.

### **References**

Adelman, Daniel C., Thomas B. Casale, Jonathan Corren. Manual of Allergy and Immunology; 2002.

Anatomical Chart Company, The World's Best Anatomical Charts-Diseases and Disorders; 2003