



Get the buzz on bee stings

By Robert St. Clair, MD, North Basin Medical Clinics



Nothing ruins a family picnic, ballgame or day at the river like a bee sting.

Although bee stings are generally little more than a painful nuisance, you should know how to best treat them and what to do if an allergic reaction occurs.

Treating a bee sting

A bee will leave behind a stinger, most likely attached to a venom sac. Try to remove the stinger as quickly as possible using a credit card or other blunt edged object to **scrape** it away. Do not try to squeeze the stinger out as you can be squeezing more poison into your skin. After you remove the stinger, you should...

- Wash sting or bite with soap and water to keep it clean.
- Apply a cold pack or wet washcloth for swelling.
- Do not rub or itch the sting. It will only make things worse.
- Take acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain if you wish.
- If you itch, apply an over-the-counter anti-histamine such as calamine lotion or cortisone cream to the area, or take a dose of oral Benadryl.
- Watch for signs of an allergic reaction.

Of course, there will be some pain, itching and swelling. If swelling is limited to the general area of the sting, this is called a "local reaction". A local reaction is harmless and does not warrant a trip to the doctor.

Allergic reaction

Fear of allergic reaction to a bee sting is quite common, especially when dealing with young children who may not have been stung before. An allergic reaction is also called a "systemic reaction" because it affects other body systems such as the lungs. A systemic reaction generally comes on within an hour of the sting, though in *very rare* cases, can be delayed. If you see the following signs of an allergic reaction, seek immediate medical attention...

- Large skin rash or profound area of swelling around the sting
- Wheezing or difficulty breathing
- Tightness in throat or chest, or swelling of the lips
- Rapid heartbeat
- Dizziness or fainting
- Nausea or vomiting

Again, if you see any of these symptoms, or are stung inside the mouth, come to the clinic or Emergency Room as quickly as possible. If your doctor has prescribed an EpiPen for you, use it.

EpiPen Usage

Many people know they are allergic to bee stings. Chances are their healthcare provider has prescribed an Epi-Pen for emergency use. An EpiPen is a single dose shot of Epinephron (adrenaline) which counteracts a severe allergic reaction. These are not toys. Epinephron is a serious drug with serious effects on the body. Do not use it unless you are certain you have systemic symptoms like those listed above.

Also, please make sure that if you do use your EpiPen after a sting, do not stay out water skiing for another hour or two, or keep watching the ballgame. Seek immediate medical attention as a second wave of symptoms can come on several hours after the original allergic reaction.

Preventing Bee Stings

Insects and other biting critters seem to be everywhere, but there are a few precautions you can take to decrease your chances of being stung.

- Do not swat at bees. They will sting you to defend themselves.
- Do not play with bee hives or hornet nests.
- Wear sandals when walking on grass so you don't step on a bee.

Another good piece of practical advice to avoid bee stings is to carry a sheet of Bounce fabric softener in your pocket. I'm told the US Postal Service recommends this to all mail carriers as it seems to keep bees away. Does it really work? I don't know, but it's worth a try to avoid the pain and inconvenience of a bee sting.

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