

# STINGING INSECT ALLERGY



Stinging insects (e.g., membrane-winged yellow jackets, bees, hornets, wasps) can cause severe and potentially life-threatening reactions in patients who have become sensitized (allergic) to the venom.

Over 95% of stings in the Pacific Northwest are from yellow jackets. These stings normally cause localized pain, redness, and swelling. Although the pain is usually better in two hours, the swelling may increase for up to 24 hours. However, some people develop hives all over their body and experience breathing problems, throat closure, a drop in blood pressure, and collapse—termed anaphylaxis. For these people, an insect sting can be life-threatening.

## **Avoid Situations That Attract Stinging Insects**

- Keep food covered until the moment it is served. Any food will attract stinging insects, including outdoor cooking or eating, feeding pets out-of-doors, or dripping from a child's popsicle.
- Keep garbage areas meticulously clean.
- Garden cautiously. A trowel penetrating a bumble bee nest or mowing over a yellow jacket nest will infuriate these insects.
- Electric hedge clippers, tractors, and power mowers should not be used by persons severely allergic to insect stings.
- Vines, which may conceal stinging insect hives, should be removed from the house.

## **Wear Proper Clothing**

- Avoid dark clothing, bright colors, and flower prints which arouse stinging insects. Light colors such as white, green, tan, or khaki do not appear to attract or antagonize stinging insects. Wear long trousers and a long-sleeved shirt.
- Wear shoes when outdoors except on a hard, sandy beach. However, one type of wasp spends most of its life in dune grass. Sandals are not considered adequate protection, but sneakers are.
- Avoid the use of perfumes, hair spray, hair tonics, suntan lotions, and other cosmetics with fragrances, which attract insects.

## **Avoid Certain High-Risk Behaviors**

- Avoid outdoor eating or cooking, particularly during late summer or early fall.
- Inspect any object for stinging insects whether to be touched, sat on, or brushed against.
- Caution children not to disturb insect nests. Teach children not to pick up outdoor toys without first inspecting them to see that no insect has alighted upon them. The aimless kicking of a dead log sends vibrations through the ground, disturbing nearby yellow jackets.
- When a stinging insect approaches, stay still or move slowly. Likewise, never swat a stinging insect in the air as it will usually not sting unless antagonized. Hornets, wasps, and yellow jackets, which do not lose their stingers, should be brushed off promptly. Honeybees should be removed more carefully as they will frequently embed their stinger in the skin after stinging. (see below)
- Be careful when you shake out clothing that has been left on the ground. Yellow jackets or other stinging insects could be in the folds of the clothing.
- Avoid orchards in bloom, clover fields, and any areas that are abundant with flowers.
- Try not to mow lawns, trim hedges, or prune trees during the dangerous seasons.
- Collisions cause stings, so avoid running, or riding horses, bicycles, or motorcycles during dangerous seasons. A convertible automobile with the top down is especially hazardous.

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### Yellow Jackets

Yellow jackets build nests in the ground, emerging through small holes. When a yellow jacket nest is noted, the outlet should be marked with a thin stick. **IMPORTANT:** The safest way of disposing of any stinging insect nest is by employing a professional exterminator, especially for a highly sensitive individual.

### Honeybees

Honeybees may be removed by a professional or by a beekeeper. Beekeepers are frequently delighted to have an extra colony for the trouble. After being stung, if the honeybee stinger is embedded at the sting site the venom sac is usually attached; careful and immediate removal of the stinger can slow absorption of the venom. This can be done with one swift scrape of the fingernail. Remember that picking up the sac between the forefinger and thumb can squeeze in more venom. Honeybees are attracted by flowery fragrances, bright colors, and smooth water surfaces. Fragrant perfumes, colognes, and powders also act as attractants.

### Wasps

Wasps build open comb nests under eaves, in carpets, behind shutters, in shrubs, and almost any protected place. Wasps live on juices, sap, and nectar. They are attracted by odors such as spoiled foods, soft drinks, fruit juices, leather, perspiration, bright colors, and a water supply.

### Hornets

Hornets build gray pyriform or football-shaped hives, usually in shrubs or trees often high or far out on a branch.