Stinging insect allergy

Each year, many Americans are stung by insects. For most, these stings mean pain and discomfort generally lasting only a few hours. Symptoms may include redness, swelling and itching at the site of the sting. However, some people are allergic to insect stings. This means that their immune systems overreact to the venom injected by a stinging insect --the insect venom interacts with the antibody they produced in response to an earlier sting. This triggers the release of histamine and other chemicals that cause a variety of allergic symptoms.

For a small number of people with severe venom allergy, stings may be life-threatening. Severe allergic reactions to insect stings can involve many body organs and may develop rapidly. This reaction is called anaphylaxis. In severe cases, a rapid fall in blood pressure may result in shock and loss of consciousness. Anaphylaxis is a medical emergency, and may be fatal.

Many stinging insects are foraging for food, so don't look or smell like a flower—avoid brightly colored clothing and perfume when outdoors. Because the smell of food attracts insects, be careful when cooking, eating, or drinking sweet drinks like soda or juice outdoors. Keep food covered until eaten. Wear closed-toe shoes outdoors and avoid going barefoot. Also, avoid loose-fitting garments that can trap insects between material and skin.

Taking the following steps can help in treating local reactions to insect stings:

- Elevate the affected arm or leg and apply ice or a cold compress to reduce swelling and pain.
- Gently clean blisters with soap and water to prevent secondary infections; do not break blisters.
- Use topical steroid ointments or oral antihistamines to relieve itching.
- See your doctor if swelling progresses or if the sting site seems infected.

If you are severely insect-allergic and have had prior reactions, be prepared to treat potentially serious symptoms. Carry an auto-injectable epinephrine (adrenalin) device at all times-- a short-term treatment for severe allergic reactions. Learn how to self-administer the epinephrine according to your allergist's instructions, and replace the device before the labeled expiration date. Never store the device in hot or freezing environments.

People who have severe allergies to insect venom should consider receiving insect venom immunotherapy, a highly effective vaccination program that actually prevents future allergic sting reactions in 97% of treated patients. During immunotherapy, your allergy doctor administers gradually stronger doses of venom extract initially every week, but as maintenance doses are reached the interval may sometimes be expanded to one month or more. If you have questions about venom immunotherapy or other treatments for stinging insect allergy, be sure to call our office. Patients who receive appropriate treatment such as immunotherapy and who practice careful avoidance measures can participate in regular outdoor activities.

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