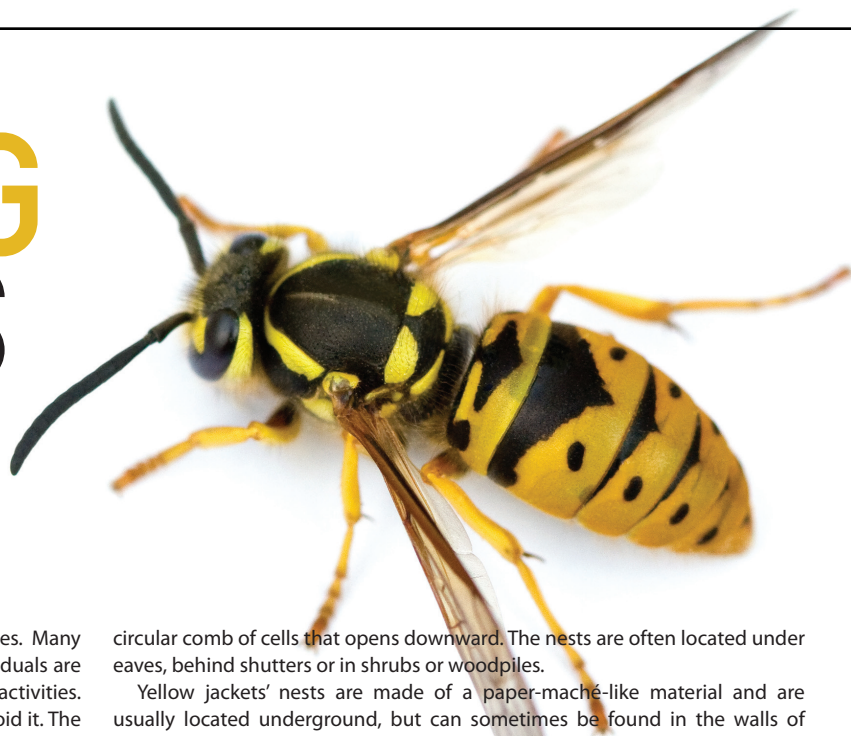


STINGING INSECTS

How to protect yourself from bites.

By: [DR. AMIN MERY]



Austin and the surrounding areas are great for outdoor activities. Many enjoy the great weather and spending time outside, but some individuals are allergic to the stinging insects they may encounter in these outdoor activities. They need to be made aware of their possible allergy and how to avoid it. The first step is identifying the insects that can pose a problem in Texas.

FIRE ANTS

Fire ants are the most common insects encountered in Austin. These imported ants infest more than 260 million acres in the southern United States, where they have become a considerable agricultural pest and a significant health hazard.

Fire ants are stinging insects that are cousins to bees and wasps. Males are black in appearance, and females have a red-brown appearance. Sterile female fire ant workers can sting repeatedly. First they bite, and then while holding on to the skin with their jaws, they inject venom with stingers located at the end of their abdomens. Their venom produces a burning, fire-like sensation.

Almost everyone stung by fire ants develops an itchy, localized hive at the sting site, which usually subsides within 30 minutes to one hour. This is followed by a small blister at the site of each sting within four hours. A sterile blister with pus forms in eight to 24 hours. It then ruptures and usually resolves in 48 to 72 hours.

While this is the common reaction, we need to be aware of persons who develop severe allergic symptoms, such as anaphylaxis. Anaphylaxis is a generalized, systemic allergic reaction to insect stings that may be life threatening. It usually occurs in persons sensitized by a previous sting. It may be manifested by flushing, generalized hives, swelling of the face, eyes or throat, difficulty breathing or loss of consciousness.

USE THE FOLLOWING TIPS TO TREAT FIRE ANT STINGS:

- Elevate the extremity and apply ice or a cold compress to reduce swelling and relieve pain.
- Clean blisters with soap and water to prevent secondary infections. Do not break the blister.
- Topical steroid ointments and oral antihistamines may relieve the itching associated with these reactions.
- If you have a history of a severe reaction, you must get advice and treatment from your allergist. Make sure you have auto-injectable epinephrine handy at all times.

FLYING INSECTS

Honeybees and bumblebees are not aggressive and will only sting when provoked. However, Africanized honeybees, known as killer bees, are found in the Southwestern United States, are aggressive and may sting in swarms. Domesticated honeybees live in manmade hives, while wild honeybees live in colonies or honeycombs in hollow trees or cavities of buildings.

Paper wasps' nests are usually made of a paper-like material that forms a

circular comb of cells that opens downward. The nests are often located under eaves, behind shutters or in shrubs or woodpiles.

Yellow jackets' nests are made of a paper-maché-like material and are usually located underground, but can sometimes be found in the walls of frame buildings, cracks in masonry or woodpiles.

Hornets are usually larger than yellow jackets. Their nests are gray or brown, football-shaped and made of a paper material similar to that of yellow jackets' nests. Hornets' nests are usually found high aboveground on branches of trees, in shrubbery, on gables or in tree hollows.

Avoidance is key with all flying insects. These insects are most likely to sting if their homes are disturbed, so it is important to have nests around your home destroyed. If you come across these insects, remain calm and move away slowly.

Avoid brightly colored clothing and perfume when outdoors; these attract insects because they mimic flowers and plants the insects seek out for sustenance. Take caution when cooking, eating and drinking sweet drinks like soda or juice outdoors because the smell of food attracts insects, as well. Beware of insects inside straws or canned drinks. 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.

If the insect leaves its stinger in your skin, remove the stinger as quickly as possible to avoid receiving more venom. A quick scrape of your fingernail removes the stinger and sac. Do not squeeze the sac, as this forces more venom through the stinger and into your skin. If the stinging insect remains attached, try to remain calm, brush the insect from the skin and then immediately leave the area.

THE FOLLOWING STEPS CAN HELP IN TREATING LOCAL REACTIONS TO INSECT STINGS:

- Raise the affected limb and apply a cold compress to reduce swelling and pain.
- Gently clean the area with soap and water to prevent secondary infections, and do not break blisters.
- Use topical steroid ointments or oral antihistamines to relieve itching.
- See your physician if the swelling progresses, or if the sting site seems infected.

If you are severely allergic to insect stings, carry epinephrine in an auto-injector. Learn how and when to self-administer the epinephrine and replace the device before the labeled expiration date. Remember that epinephrine is a rescue medication only. If you get stung and use epinephrine, call 911 or have someone take you to an emergency room immediately. Those with severe allergies may want to consider wearing a bracelet or necklace that identifies the wearer as having severe allergies.

For more information, call 512-610-0549, or visit www.westlakeallergy.com.