



# NORTH TEXAS ALLERGY & ASTHMA ASSOCIATES

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## INSECT HYPERSENSITIVITY

### What are allergies to insect stings?

When you are stung by an insect, poisons and other toxins in the insect's venom enter your skin. It is normal to have some swelling, redness, pain, and itching at the site of a sting. An allergic reaction to a sting occurs when your body's immune system overreacts to substances called allergens that are in the venom of stinging insects.

### What can I expect when I am stung?

You may not always develop an allergic reaction the first time you are stung. Even if your first reaction to a sting may be mild, allergic reactions can get worse with each sting. Your next reactions may become more severe or even life-threatening.

### What causes an allergic reaction to insect stings?

An allergic reaction to an insect sting is caused by sensitivity to allergens in the venom of the insect. Your immune system over reacts to these allergens as though they are harmful, foreign substances in your body. A few types of stinging insects—such as bees, wasps, hornets, yellow jackets, and fire ants—cause most allergic reactions.

### What are the symptoms of a severe allergic reaction?

Symptoms of anaphylactic shock include:

- feeling faint, anxiety or a sense of "impending doom"
- difficulty breathing, including wheezing
- nausea and vomiting and/or stomach pain
- swelling of lips, tongue, or throat (angioedema)
- itchy, blotchy, raised rash called hives (urticaria)
- pale, cool, damp skin
- drowsiness, confusion, or loss of consciousness

### How is it treated?

Treatment for insect sting allergies depends on the severity of your reaction. Mild local reactions can often be treated with cold packs and medications for pain, swelling, and itching. A severe reaction (anaphylaxis) is potentially life-threatening and requires emergency care. Avoiding future insect stings can prevent allergic reactions. If you have severe allergic reactions, you should carry an allergy kit, which includes antihistamine tablets and an epinephrine injection. You may also want to seek treatment with a series of allergy shots (immunotherapy) to reduce or eliminate your sensitivity to the insect venom. You should also acquire a medical card or Medic Alert bracelet which identifies you as having an allergy to insect stings.

### How can I protect myself from being stung again?

Stay out of the "territory" of the stinging insects' nests. These insects are most likely to sting if their homes are disturbed, so it is important to have hives and nests around your home destroyed. Since this activity can be dangerous, a trained exterminator should be hired. If you encounter any flying stinging insects, remain calm and quiet, and move slowly away from them. 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.

### How do you treat severe allergic reactions?

Anaphylactic shock requires *emergency medical attention*. If you suspect you or someone you know is in shock, *call 911* and ask for paramedics and an ambulance. If you have a known severe allergy, the physician will recommend carrying an injection kit. With the kit you can give yourself a shot of medicine to counteract the allergic reaction.