

INSECT ALLERGIES

1. What is it?

Insect allergies are abnormal reactions to the stings of certain insects - bees, wasps, hornets, yellow jackets (members of the hymenoptera family), and some ants (fire ants). Normal reactions to these stings last only a few hours and involve some pain, redness, swelling and possibly itching around the sting site. Allergic persons have more severe local reactions to these stings, and may have severe reactions that involve the whole body. Severe reactions can be fatal if not treated immediately.

2. What causes it?

As with other allergies, the exact cause is unknown. What is known is that 60% of those with insect allergies have no other types of allergies.

3. What happens when an allergic person is stung?

When one of these insects stings a person, it injects venom under the skin. As this venom circulates through the body, it causes the reaction. A large local reaction will occur. This involves redness, itching, pain and swelling at the site of the sting and in the area surrounding it. This local reaction reaches its peak in 24 hours, but it may last for several days.

A severe allergic reaction can happen any time from immediately after the person is stung to an hour after the sting. This type reaction involves the whole body and can be life threatening. The person may feel weak, dizzy, and nauseated. There may be stomach cramps and diarrhea. There may be hives and itching over any part of the body, wheezing, tightness in the throat, difficulty breathing, and a rapid drop in blood pressure. The victim may go into shock and may become unconscious. These reactions may be fatal if medical care is not obtained immediately.

4. What usually happens with insect allergies?

Allergic persons may have normal reactions following many insect stings, and may not know they are allergic. Then one day they will get what is called a "sensitizing" sting. This means that after a sting by one of these insects, their bodies set up the mechanism needed to produce an allergic reaction. After they are "sensitized", they will have an allergic reaction the next time they are stung. A person may become "sensitized" at any time during his or her life. Once a person is sensitized, the reaction will be worse with each sting. Not only do the reactions become more severe, but they occur faster. This means that each time a sting occurs, there will be less time for the person to get medical help before the reaction sets in. This is why it is so important for persons with insect allergies to be treated.

5. What problems may occur?

As stated earlier, there may be pain and swelling around the area of the sting for several days. With more severe reactions, the person will require emergency medical treatment. Your doctor will give you a prescription for "Epi-Pen". You should have this filled immediately and carry the Epi-Pen with you at all times. This will allow you to treat yourself should a sting occur. (Note: after taking the Epi-Pen, you should proceed to an emergency room.) If the reaction is severe and treatment is not available, death could occur. This is why it is so important that allergic persons carry their Epi-Pen at all times.

6. **What happens when insect allergies are treated?**

Treatment for insect allergies involves an injection program using pure venom of the insects to which the person is allergic. As allergic patients receive insect venom injections, they go through a brief period when they are more sensitive to the stings of insects to which they are allergic. This is why it is so important for you to understand your doctor's instructions fully and to carry your Epi-Pen with you at all times! During this time extra precautions are taken to avoid being stung. After a period of treatment, patients' tolerance is built up enough so that they can be stung and have only a small local reaction.

7. **What special precautions should I take?**

Because you will be more sensitive to insect stings for a brief period, it is **very important** for you to follow your doctor's instructions and to follow the printed guide- lines "How to Avoid Being Stung."