

Bees, Wasps, and Ants Stings

Barbara Brillhart RN PhD FNP-BC



Warmer weather in the desert of Arizona encourages the presence of insects as bees, wasps, and ants. There is a type of wasp that is called the Velvet ant which is found in desert to shrub lands of Arizona. The males have wings, but no stingers. The female Velvet ant has a stinger, but no wings. They are 1/8” to 1” in size and have a characteristic red color to the body plus bristle-like hairs on the body. The Velvet ant has an extremely pain sting and can sting many times.

This article will present the symptoms of stings from bees, wasps, and ants. It will also include first aid for the stings and tips to avoid insect stings.

The local reactions to the insect sting are characterized by swelling and redness, plus intense pain at the sting site. This reaction can be serious if located near the person’s eyes as this could lead to damage of the eye. Stings involving the mouth could cause swelling leading to airway obstruction.

Multiple stings, considered ten or more, can result in toxic reactions. The toxic reactions include vomiting, diarrhea, fainting, itching, and spasms of the upper air ways. It is estimated that 4% of the population has serious reactions to insect stings. Some people are extremely sensitive to insect stings which lead to anaphylactic reactions. Anaphylactic reactions occur rapidly to the sting and intensive quickly (within 30 minutes). Serious anaphylactic reactions include: itching, dry cough, chest constriction, wheezing, low blood pressure, dizziness, nausea, weakness, vomiting, and shock.

Treatment:

- Remove the stinger by scraping. Avoid pulling out the stinger with tweezers as this can squeeze venom into the wound.
- Wash the site.
- Apply hydrocortisone ointment to the site. Benzocaine spray could also be used.
- Apply an ice pack to the site.
- Take an oral antihistamine as Benadryl and pain medications as Tylenol.

- Elevate the area with the sting.
- Later, observe the site for symptoms of infection as swelling and drainage.
- People with known serious reactions to insect stings carry emergency epinephrine kits to administer the shot to prevent anaphylactic reactions.
- A serious reaction to stings requires medical care. The person may need air way intubation, intravenous fluids and medications as steroids. The person may remain in the hospital for several days to observe for cardiac, respiratory, or neurological complications.

Prevention tips for insect stings includes: (1) avoid bright colored clothing, perfume or scented lotion as they attract bees, (2) Be aware of areas that insects inhabit as nests, bee hives (even within cactus), plants, debris, and ant hills, (3) Control odors of food or garbage, (4) Velvet ants (wasps) are active during the day and burrow under debris or climb into plants. Note a walking Velvet ant is a female with the stinger. these wasps squeak if bothered, (5) Remember that insect repellent is not effective against ants, bees, or wasps.