Insect Sting Allergies

Insect sting allergies are caused by insect poisons or venom, often from bees and yellow jackets. The symptoms that are caused by the sting tend to vary depending on the individual. For most people, a sting causes only brief pain, slight redness, swelling, and itching immediately around the sting. This normal reaction may last for an hour or two and does not require medical attention. Some people, however, experience more severe pain, itching, and swelling. For these people, the area affected may extend well beyond the immediate sting site and may last for two or three days. Medical treatment may help relieve the symptoms, but, the reaction is still not considered to be dangerous.

On the other hand, for about 5 percent of the population, the allergic reaction to an insect sting can be so violent that it can cause death. The dangerous response to an insect sting is called a “generalized allergic reaction.” Within five minutes, the reaction may involve the whole body. It can include dizziness, hives, itching, weakness, or nausea. The person may experience trouble breathing as well as stomach cramps and diarrhea. This reaction requires immediate, emergency medical attention. It’s interesting to note that a person who reacts this way to a sting once may or may not do so if stung again.

Obviously, the most effective way to prevent insect sting allergies is to avoid insects. Don’t go outdoors barefoot or in sandals. Wear a hat, long sleeves, and pants when insects are about. Avoid flowers and flowering shrubs outdoors, and avoid wearing bright colors and perfumes. These attract insects.

People who are subject to a life-threatening reaction to stings can protect themselves by undergoing immunotherapy, or allergy shots. Immunotherapy is a series of regular injections that gradually build up resistance to insect venom or poison. Immunotherapy is very effective, but it is not recommended for everyone. Each person’s degree of sensitivity and general health must be considered.

If you’re stung by a bee and the stinger is present, flick it out with your fingernail if possible. Never squeeze the stinger; you may release more venom into your skin. Put a cold pack or ice cube on the sting to help reduce swelling. An oral antihistamine, such as Benadryl or Chlor-Trimeton, may help relieve the pain, swelling, and itching. Anyone who has had a severe allergic reaction to insects should carry an emergency kit that has a syringe and epinephrine. You’ll want to discuss this with your medical professional.

If you develop signs of a severe allergic reaction soon after being stung, such as rapidly spreading hives, throat tightness or wheezing, go to the Emergency Room immediately. Also, if you have been bitten by a black widow or brown recluse spider, apply ice to the bite and call your medical professional.

For more health information ...

- Connect to our Web site at members.kp.org.
- Check your Kaiser Permanente Healthwise Handbook.
• Listen to the Kaiser Permanente Healthphone at 1-800-332-7563. For TTY, call 1-800-777-9059.
• Visit your facility’s Health Education Department for books, videos, classes, and additional resources.

This information is not intended to diagnose health problems or to take the place of medical advice or care you receive from your physician or other medical professional. If you have persistent health problems, or if you have additional questions, please consult with your doctor.

If you have questions or need more information about your medication, please speak to your pharmacist.

Kaiser Permanente does not endorse any brand names; any similar products may be used.

If you have an emergency medical condition, call 911 or go to the nearest hospital. When you have an emergency medical condition, we cover emergency care from Plan providers and non-Plan providers anywhere in the world.

An emergency medical condition is (1) a medical or psychiatric condition that manifests itself by acute symptoms of sufficient severity (including severe pain) such that you could reasonably expect the absence of immediate medical attention to result in serious jeopardy to your health or serious impairment or dysfunction of your bodily functions or organs; or, (2) when you are in active labor and there isn’t enough time for safe transfer to a Plan hospital before delivery, or if transfer poses a threat to your or your unborn child’s health and safety.