

## Prevention

# The Best Way to Treat a Painful Hornet Sting, According to Experts

Step one: Quickly (and calmly) walk away from the area.



By [Korin Miller](#) May 5, 2020



In case you missed it, giant Asian hornets have been spotted in the United States for the first time—and it's safe to say the news has been a bit unsettling. The “murder hornets” are known for their toxic sting and have the ability to wipe out entire honeybee hives in a matter of hours.

But, take a deep breath. Only a small number of sightings have been confirmed in Washington state and parts of Canada, so it's not super likely that you'll come across one in other parts of the U.S. just yet. (If you think you have, report it to your state's department of agriculture here.)

Still, you might stumble upon a native hornet as they become more active throughout the spring and summer. And while some are more powerful than others, a hornet sting can *hurt*. Unlike bees, these pests can and will attack you more than once when provoked. If you play your cards right, your odds of getting stung by a hornet are low. But if you happen to find yourself in that situation, here's exactly what to do and how to treat the sting, according to experts.

## Why do hornets sting people, anyway?

Hornets are social insects that live in colonies, and they work hard to protect that colony, says Nancy Troyano, Ph.D., board-certified entomologist and director of operations education and training for Western Exterminator Company. “They will usually only attack to defend themselves or their colony when they feel it is being threatened,” Troyano says.

This can happen when you come into close proximity to their nest, which is about a 10-foot radius by most hornet standards, Troyano says. Of course, you probably aren't in the habit of walking up to hornet nests for kicks, but you can come near one by accident—typically in higher areas, like treetops, attics, under roofs, and ceilings in garages.

“For a lot of people, it's bad timing,” says entomologist Roberto M. Pereira, Ph.D., an insect research scientist with the University of Florida. “You may walk in a place where they are or cross paths and bump into them. Their reaction is to sting to get away.”

## What does a hornet sting feel like?

It's not comfortable. “Hornet stings, like bee stings, are painful and perhaps even more so compared to honeybees, simply because they are larger in size and so have a larger sized stinger,” Troyano says.

While bees lose their stinger (and in some cases die) after attacking you, hornets don't. “They can sting more than once,” Pereira says. It's not just the puncture wound that hurts—hornets also inject venom that's designed to cause pain when they sting. “People describe the sensation of being stung as a sharp, burning sensation, followed by intense itching,” Troyano says.

## How to treat a hornet sting properly

First, you want to do your best to avoid being stung multiple times. “If you are stung, calmly but quickly walk away from the area,” Troyano says. (Read: No swatting!)

Again, hornets typically sting when you're in close proximity to their nest, so they'll most likely keep on stinging you if you stay put, Pereira says. “The best thing to do is to clear out of that area in general so that they don't have any motives to sting you more,” he says.

If a hornet happens to land on you, gently brush it off and walk away calmly. “Don’t panic,” says Judy Black, VP of Quality Assurance and Technical Services at Orkin.

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**! Hornet stings can cause allergic reactions in some people, like difficulty breathing, swelling of your mouth, lips, or throat, shortness of breath, nausea, or hives, Troyano says. If you experience any of those symptoms, seek medical care immediately.**

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As soon as you can, wash the sting with soap and water to clean the wound, and then apply ice to tamp down the swelling and inflammation, says board-certified dermatologist **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York.

Tenderness and swelling can last up to a week. Take an ibuprofen to ease any soreness and if you’re dealing with itching, a topical steroid like hydrocortisone can help, Dr. Goldenberg says.

If the area where you were stung continues to be inflamed or it gets very red and feels warm to the touch, Dr. Goldenberg says it could be a sign of infection. In that case, call your doctor for proper treatment.