

# The Best Way to Treat a Painful Jellyfish Sting, According to Doctors

Should you *really* pee on a jellyfish sting? We asked experts to weigh in.



By [Korin Miller](#) May 13, 2020



If you've ever been stung by a jellyfish, you're definitely not alone. Last summer, The Weather Channel reported that more than 3,000 people were treated for jellyfish stings in Central Florida in just *two weeks*.

"Very rarely, you can have a systemic reaction to the sting, which requires immediate medical attention," says Mark Conroy, M.D., an emergency medicine physician at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.

Jellyfish stings are typically easy to treat, even though they can be pretty painful. But there are a lot of myths about what to do after one gets you: Should you wash it off and hope for the best? Grab some ice? Have someone pee on you? This isn't exactly something that's covered in-depth during high school science class.

So, before you hit the beach this summer, read up on exactly what you should (and shouldn't) do if a jellyfish stings you, according to doctors.

## Back up: Why do jellyfish sting in the first place?

There are more than 200 documented species of jellyfish out there, and even more stinging organisms they're related to. The type you're likely to run into depends on where you're enjoying the beach, but some notable jellies of concern include the lion's mane, Portuguese man-of-war, sea nettle, and sea wasps (or box jellyfish), per the U.S. National Library of Medicine. If you swim in the Atlantic or Pacific Oceans, though, you're most likely to see a moon jelly (pictured above).

Jellyfish sting their prey as a way to hunt them, and the venom they release actually paralyzes their targets, according to *National Geographic*. (BTW: Jellyfish like to eat fish, shrimp, crabs, and tiny plants.) They don't actively pursue humans, but if you happen to brush up against one in the ocean or go out of your way to touch it, you could end up with a sting.

## What does a jellyfish sting feel like?



It can definitely hurt, but the severity depends on the type of species you make contact with. "Jellyfish tentacles contain sharp structures full of venom, called nematocysts," explains board-certified dermatologist [Gary Goldenberg, M.D.](#), assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in

New York. “Once these penetrate your skin, you feel a sharp sensation—the sting—followed by blistering and pain from the venom.”

Other symptoms to watch out for include a raised red area where the sting occurred or a skin rash. In very severe cases, a bad jellyfish sting can cause muscle cramps, numbness, sweating, and even trouble breathing—a sign to seek medical attention ASAP.

## Okay, should you really pee on a jellyfish sting?

This myth has been floating around forever, and even showed up on a season four episode of *Friends*, “The One With the Jellyfish.” Monica gets stung on her foot while she’s at the beach—and Joey and Chandler convince her that peeing on it is the only way to ease her pain.

But for the record, no, **peeing on a jellyfish sting won’t help**. “It does not work,” says Dr. Conroy. In fact, peeing on a jellyfish sting can actually make things worse because the salt in urine can cause a jellyfish’s stinging cells—which could still be on your skin—to reactivate and sting you even more, he says. Also, it’s just gross.

## How to treat a jellyfish sting safely

### ✓ First, get out of the water.

“Some jellyfish have longer tentacles, and those could still reach you,” Dr. Conroy says. “You want to remove yourself from that situation.”

### ✓ Give it a thorough rinse.

Once you’re out of the ocean, Dr. Conroy recommends rinsing off the area where you were stung with salt water. “Salt water is better than fresh water, because salt water is more standard for jellyfish,” Dr. Conroy says. “Fresh water can irritate the stinging cells of the jellyfish, and cause them to release more venom.” Avoid rubbing the area with your hands.

Rinsing with vinegar is also helpful, if you have some nearby, as it “inhibits the release of more poison from the jellyfish tentacles,” Dr. Goldenberg says. The U.S. National Library of Medicine recommends using large amounts of vinegar for a minimum of 30 seconds on any and all jellyfish stings.

### ✓ Then, get rid of stragglers.

After your rinse, Dr. Conroy says you’ll want to use tweezers to pluck away any tentacles that are still on your skin. Don’t use your bare hands, or your fingers can get stung, too.

### ✓ Give it some heat.

Once you’ve given the area a rinse and removed any tentacles, you can soak the site of the sting in hot tap water for 20 to 40 minutes to relieve pain.

## ✓ Try some OTC meds.

The pain from a jellyfish sting doesn't magically go away, but it should get better over time, Dr. Conroy says. If you're struggling, taking ibuprofen or acetaminophen can help. You can also apply hydrocortisone cream to the site if it's especially red or starts to itch, Dr. Goldenberg says.

If the area of the sting becomes very red, swollen, painful, or just it isn't improving, Dr. Goldenberg recommends calling your doctor. If you do end up needing urgent care because your symptoms feel severe, have this info handy:

- Person's age, weight, and condition
- Type of jellyfish, if possible
- Time the person was stung
- Location of the sting

Stay safe out there, swimmers!