

The Best Way to Treat a Painful Bee Sting, According to Experts

Step one: Pull out the stinger the *right* way.



By [Korin Miller](#) May 14, 2020



It happens to the best of us: You're enjoying a barbecue, gardening in your backyard, or just getting some fresh air, when you're suddenly stung by a bee.

The aftermath of that sting can look and feel a bit different for everyone. If you have a severe allergy to bee stings, you'll need immediate medical attention. But even if you simply have a mild reaction to the sting, you'll want to treat it properly to avoid potential problems.

So, after you get over the initial shock of being attacked by the fuzzy flyer, it's time to spring into action. Here, insect experts break down everything you need to know about bee stings and exactly what to do if it happens to you.

First: Why do bees sting people?

It's important to note that not *all* bees sting. In fact, male bees actually don't have a stinger, says Ben Hottel, Ph.D., technical services manager at Orkin.

"There are at least a few thousand bee species in the U.S.," says Emory Matts, M.S., a board-certified entomologist and technical services manager for Western Exterminator Company. "Many can potentially sting people."

You're most likely to be stung by a honey bee or bumble bee, with honey bee stings being the most common, Matts says. A honey bee can only sting you once, as it has a barbed stinger that gets stuck in your skin after an attack. While bumble bees are usually "less aggressive," Matts says they can sting you more than once.

In many cases, it can seem like a bee just went berserk and decided to target you for kicks. But in reality, bees usually "sting to protect themselves or defend a nest," Hottel says. Think: You walked barefoot over a bee, or accidentally chose a picnic location that was right near its home.

What does a bee sting feel like?

It's not exactly fun, but most people can handle it. "Bee stings typically result in immediate pain and localized reaction of mild swelling, redness, and itching at the site of the sting," says board-certified entomologist Nancy Troyano, Ph.D., director of operations education and training for Western Exterminators.

Entomologist Justin Schmidt at the University of Arizona actually allowed himself to get stung by a variety of insects for research, and put the findings into his book, *The Sting of the Wild*. He classified the pain of different stings on a scale of one to four, with four being the most painful. According to his work, most small bees can inflict pain at a level one, while honey bees and yellow jackets are a level two. (The most intense, level four pain comes from tarantula hawk wasps and Asian giant hornets, a.k.a. "murder hornets.")

What happens if you're allergic to bee stings?

Bee sting allergies can be serious, and even deadly due to a severe reaction called anaphylaxis. You may experience shortness of breath, swelling of your tongue or lips, tightness in your throat, or even lose consciousness.

Keep in mind that it's possible to have a severe allergic reaction to a bee sting despite feeling mostly OK after a sting in the past. That's especially true if you were stung by a lot of bees at once. "This will dramatically increase the odds of having an allergic reaction to the venom," Troyano says.

It's rare to die of an allergic reaction from a bee sting, but it can happen. Nearly 90 people died in 2017 after an attack from a stinging insect, according to data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC).

How to treat a bee sting for fast relief

If you were stung by a bee and you have a known allergy or develop an allergic reaction, seek medical attention immediately. If you don't have an allergy, it's still important to treat the sting with care, 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. Here's what he recommends:

1. Pull out the stinger.

Because honey bee stingers get stuck, they continue to pump venom into your skin, even when they're detached from the bee, Hottel says. You can remove the stinger by scraping over the area with a fingernail or piece of gauze, the American Academy of Dermatology (AAD) says. Don't use tweezers—squeezing the stinger can cause more venom to be released into your skin.

2. Then, wash the area well.

Warm water and soap will help clean the wound, Dr. Goldenberg says.

3. Give it some ice.

This will help reduce swelling and inflammation, Dr. Goldenberg says. Mild swelling at the site of the sting is normal, but you'll want to get medical care ASAP if you notice swelling in other parts of your body.

4. Take medicine for the pain, if needed.

OTC pain meds like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help with any lingering pain.

5. See your doctor if symptoms get worse.

It's not common, but it's possible for a bee sting to become infected. "Call your doctor if the area continues to swell, becomes more red over time, becomes more painful, or feels hot," Dr. Goldenberg says. That's also true if you notice the area is oozing pus or if you develop a fever and chills, he says. Your doctor will likely take a skin culture and may prescribe oral or topical antibiotics if needed.
