

What Does a Bee Sting Look Like? These Pictures Can Help You Identify One

Plus, expert tips on what you can do to soothe the sting.



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



The most innocent situations can accidentally lead to a bee sting: walking barefoot through the grass, brushing what you thought was a harmless bug off of your neck, or even reaching over to sniff a flower.

But if you don't get a visual on your tiny assassin, it's hard to be 100% sure. How can you tell if you were really stung by a bee or something freakier, like a giant hornet? We tapped insect experts to figure out what a bee sting

looks and feels like, and rounded up pictures to help you visualize it. Plus, tips on what to do if you're unlucky enough to deal with one.

First: Why do bees sting people?

In general, bees only sting “to protect themselves or defend a nest,” says Ben Hottel, Ph.D., technical services manager at Orkin. So, if you swat at a bee or poke around its nest, the odds are pretty high the bee is going to go on the offensive. Unfortunately, that's also true if you happen to accidentally be—or step—in the wrong place at the wrong time.

There are a few thousand bee species in the U.S., but you're most likely to get stung by a select few, says Emory Matts, M.S., a board-certified entomologist and technical services manager for Western Exterminator Company. “Honey bee stings are the most common. Their stingers are barbed, so they can only sting once,” he explains. “Bumble bees are less aggressive, but their stings can be more painful. Unlike honey bees, bumble bees can sting multiple times.”

Fun fact: Not *all* bees have stinging power. Male bees “are incapable of stinging people and lack a stinger entirely,” Hottel says.

What does a bee sting look like? What kind of symptoms should I expect?



The symptoms of a bee sting vary from person to person, but you may see a pink or red welt or swelling of the skin around the sting site. A central white spot usually appears where the stinger punctured your skin, Hottel says. You may also feel some itching around the area.

If you were stung by a honey bee, you'll probably still spot the stinger in your skin—and you'll want to pull it out. “Honey bee stingers have large barbs that get caught in skin, and the stinger and venom sack is actually removed from the honey bee’s body during the stinging process,” Matts says. “The venom sack will continue to pump venom into the wound, and this is why it is important to remove a bee’s stinger after getting stung.”

Keep in mind that it’s hard to know exactly what caused your sting if you didn’t see the culprit. “In general with insect bites and stings, it may be difficult to differentiate what species did it without seeing the insect in question,” Matts says.





Do bee stings hurt?

It doesn't exactly feel good to get stung by a bee, but it's not always unbearable (depending on the species). Hottel cites the work of entomologist Justin Schmidt at the University of Arizona for this one. He wrote a book called *The Sting of the Wild*, where he classified the pain associated with different stings on a scale of one to four, with four being the most painful. "He ranks honey bees at a two and describes the sting to feel like, 'burning, corrosive, but you can handle it,'" Hottel says.

"The symptoms that result from a sting vary, depending on the amount of poison that has entered the immune system of the victim," says board-certified entomologist Glen Ramsey, senior technical services manager at Orkin. "The initial pain eventually fades, but only after a period of swelling and itching."



What if I have a bee sting allergy?

Allergic reactions to bee stings can be very serious, and you'll want to call your doctor if the area continues to swell, becomes more red or painful over time, or starts to feel hot to the touch.

In severe cases, an allergic reaction to a bee sting can cause anaphylaxis, which can occur just a few minutes after the sting. You should seek medical attention immediately if you feel short of breath, your tongue or lips swell, you feel a tightness in your throat, or lose consciousness (due to a drop in blood pressure).

How does a bee sting compare to a wasp or hornet sting?

They all have slightly different venom, so the way each one can impact you may vary. (That means if you're allergic to bee stings, you may not necessarily be allergic to wasp or hornet stings.)

On the pain scale, wasps have the potential to deliver a more powerful wallop than bees. "For most people, a single sting will cause pain, swelling, or stiffness, a discomfort that may last only a few minutes or for one or more days," Ramsey says. "Unlike honey bees, wasps often are capable of stinging multiple times."

Hornets, which are larger than most stinging insects, tend to inflict stings that cause "intense pain, redness, and swelling around the site of the sting," Ramsey says.

How to treat a bee sting

First, don't panic. Then, take action. It's a good idea to follow these steps after a bee sting, per board-certified dermatologist **Gary Goldenberg, M.D.**, assistant clinical professor of dermatology at the Icahn School of Medicine at Mount Sinai in New York:

- Remove the stinger by using your fingernail or a piece of gauze. Do not use tweezers, as the squeezing can push more venom into your skin.
- Wash the area with warm water and soap to clean the wound.
- Ice the area to tamp down on swelling and inflammation.
- If you feel pain, OTC meds like acetaminophen or ibuprofen can help.

It's also possible for the sting site to become infected, so if you notice oozing pus, increased redness, more pain, or a fever and chills, call your physician, Dr. Goldenberg says. Your doctor may choose to prescribe a topical or oral antibiotic.