

QUESTION OF THE WEEK

Q: How do I know if I am allergic to bee stings?

Not all reactions to insect stings are severe or allergic. Generally speaking, there are three types of reaction to insect venom — normal, localized, and allergic. Many people believe they are allergic to bee or wasp stings, confusing normal or localized reaction with allergic reaction. The truth is that severe allergic reaction to stings is quite rare.

A normal sting reaction is indicated by pain, swelling, and redness around the place of the sting. A localized reaction is marked by swelling beyond the site of the sting — a sting on a finger may cause the entire hand to swell. Often people believe themselves to be “highly allergic” to bee stings when they experience a localized reaction. A localized reaction, however severe its symptoms, is not an allergic or immune reaction, and its symptoms are nothing over which to be overly concerned.



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A severe or systemic allergic reaction, on the other hand, is far more serious, can be life-threatening, and requires immediate medical treatment. The symptoms of severe allergic reaction can include impaired breathing, hives or rash that extend well beyond the sting location; swelling of the face, mouth, or throat; a sharp drop in blood pressure and anaphylactic shock. These symptoms, if not treated, can lead to unconsciousness and cardiac arrest. People with true allergy to bee stings would be well advised to carry epinephrine with them at all times.

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