

HEALTH ALERT!

Stinging Season Can Mean Serious Reactions

(NAPSA)—Wasps, yellow jackets and fire ants can leave much more than a sting if you happen to be allergic.

The Culprits

For people in northern states, bees, wasps and yellow jackets are the common threat. Those in southern regions of the U.S. also fear the imported red fire ant, which poses a serious danger to anyone it encounters.

Fire ants now infest approximately 318 million acres of land in the United States and Puerto Rico—up from 260 million acres only a few years ago—and are making a slow but relentless march northward. That means that the risk of life-threatening allergic reactions to their bites may be on the rise. In areas where fire ants are prevalent, more than 50 percent of people are stung each year. That can make enjoying outdoor activities near impossible for those who have a severe allergy to insect venom.

Are you allergic?

A normal reaction to an insect sting may cause localized blisters and swelling. But an estimated two million Americans have a severe allergy to insect stings; if stung they can experience a reaction known as anaphylaxis. An anaphylactic reaction usually begins within minutes and symptoms can include hives and swelling over large areas of the body, vomiting or diarrhea, throat tightness with difficulty breathing, and a sudden drop in blood pressure with severe dizziness or unconsciousness.

A person experiencing anaphy-



laxis needs emergency medical care. Epinephrine—which many ambulances cannot carry—should be administered immediately, followed by treatment at a hospital emergency room.

An Ounce of Prevention

Protecting yourself against insect stings is as easy as taking a few simple precautions:

- Always wear shoes when outdoors
- Avoid brightly colored clothing
- Only drink from containers you can see inside—insects like to hide in cans
- Keep food and garbage covered
- Steer clear of insect homes—insects are acutely sensitive to vibration, even footsteps and lawnmowers
- Have a professional remove any nests or hives on your property

Even if you've had a normal or relatively mild reaction to an insect sting before, you're still at risk for an anaphylactic reaction the next time you are stung. Doctors recommend that anyone who has ever had an unusual reaction to an insect sting see an allergist to determine whether the reaction was indeed allergic.

If so, the allergist will probably prescribe one or more units of self-injectable epinephrine, such as an EpiPen epinephrine auto-injector, to be carried at all times. EpiPen auto-injectors are a portable and easy-to-administer form of epinephrine, a drug that can help stabilize an anaphylactic reaction and buy time to reach the emergency room. Epinephrine is the only known drug for anaphylaxis, although some people will also need intravenous fluids and oxygen.

“No matter what kind of reaction to insect stings you may have, prevention is the key to protecting yourself,” says David Golden, M.D., the head of the Insect Allergy Research Project at Johns Hopkins University Asthma and Allergy Center. “If you do have an insect sting allergy, you should be sure to carry an EpiPen at all times. You can never be too careful when it comes to preventing anaphylaxis.”

Talk to your doctor about whether EpiPen is right for you and if so, ask how to use it. Epinephrine is ordinarily administered with extreme caution to patients who have heart disease. Side effects of epinephrine may include increase in heart rate and blood pressure, headaches and shakiness. Patients should be instructed carefully by a physician about the circumstances under which this lifesaving medication is used.

With a few precautions in mind, everyone can enjoy summer and fall outdoors.

For further information, visit www.allergic-reactions.com.