Wasp stings

Dear Alice,

My husband was stung by, at best count, 26 guinea wasps. What would be the best treatment for the stings, which are very painful?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Holy beehive!! Assuming that your husband is not known to be allergic to wasps (anaphylactic reactions are quite rare, affecting only about 0.5 to 3 percent of the general population; symptoms would include difficulty breathing, swelling of the throat, drop in blood pressure, and fainting), the most efficient treatments of painful sting wounds include:

- Over-the-counter (OTC) acetaminophen or ibuprofen for pain relief
- An antihistamine for excessive itching ? for example, diphenhydramine, also available OTC
- A soothing cream, such as calamine lotion or a paste made from baking soda and water, which can "cool" down the skin and relieve painful itching

Immediately after a sting, applying ice may also provide some relief. Ice needs to be wrapped in a cloth to prevent freezing the skin. Alternate the ice on the sting for ten minutes on followed by ten minutes off. Even though it's tempting, don't scratch the stings. They are open wounds, and scratching could introduce microbes that can cause infection.

Normally, if the pain increases or persists for more than a few days, is not alleviated by pain relief medication, or spreads, it's time to consult a health care provider. However, in your husband's case, since he has more than 10 stings, he might want to consult a health care provider right away given the high number of actual wounds.

In the future, you and he can think about how to avoid wasp and bee stings. The key is not to attract the bees and wasps, and if they are attracted, not to provoke them. Some helpful tips:

- Avoid brightly colored or patterned clothing when in an area where you expect there to be bees and wasps.
- Avoid using perfume or cologne in said areas.
- Don't walk barefoot across plants, especially clover and blooming ground clover (a favorite of bees).
If a bee or wasp does land on you, it's probably just interested in a smell or wants a little sip of water (your sweat), so don't swat at it. Stand still and it should fly away on its own accord. If you cannot wait for the bee or wasp to leave on its own, then gently brush it away with a piece of paper - swatting will antagonize the insect and you might end up with a sting.

Before jumping into the pool, check to make sure there aren't any bees or wasps trapped on the water (they make for particularly unhappy and easily antagonized stingers).

If you do get stung (hopefully far fewer than 26 times!) and the stinger remains in your skin, you need to remove it as soon as possible. You may do this by either scraping it off with a blunt object or pulling it out with your fingers or some tweezers. If you decide to pull out the stinger, be careful not to pinch the venom sac at the end of the stinger. If it ruptures, there'll be more pain to follow! To prevent possible infection of the sting site, keep the area clean and dry. If there's swelling, increasing pain over time, pus, and/or other signs of infection, it's really best to see a health care provider.

The next time you find yourself face-to-face with a bee or wasp that's got it in for you, remember that prevention is the key. Avoid attracting the bees and wasps, and if they just can't resist you, do not aggravate them by swatting, running, and/or screaming. They'll probably leave you alone.
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