Help! I was stung by a jellyfish!

Dear Alice,

I was at the beach about a week ago and got stung by a jellyfish about six times. It stung and hurt, but everything was healed up by the end of the day. However, just a few days ago, I got these very itchy pink bumps all over my leg, almost exactly where the bites were. The bumps seem to be mostly in straight lines and will not go away. Please help ? the itchiness is driving me mad!

? Crazy

Answer

Dear Crazy,

Jellyfish stings are certainly no stroll along the beach. They can cause mild discomfort and skin irritation, to severe pain and swelling and lesions of the skin, with a vague feeling of sickness, to a life-threatening condition. Jellyfish reactions depend upon a number of factors, such as when and where the sting occurred, the type and size of the jellyfish itself, and one's own natural immunity.

Since one week later, you are experiencing what may be a reaction, it makes sense to see a health care provider as soon as possible. They can evaluate your leg's condition to determine whether or not it's related to your recent jellyfish sting. Based on their diagnosis, appropriate treatment can be recommended so that you can find effective relief from the itching soon.

For readers interested in knowing how to treat jellyfish stings, here's the 411. If a trained lifeguard is available, they'll know the protocol and have treatment on hand. When you're on your own, get the stung person out of the water and make sure the affected area is as still as possible. Before the jellyfish's tentacles are removed from the body, its stinging capsules, a.k.a. the nematocysts, located at the tips, need to be inactivated. This is important to do in order to prevent further release of the jellyfish's toxin. To help accomplish this, thoroughly rinse the affected region with vinegar (preferably) or seawater. Contrary to popular belief, urinating on jellyfish stings makes the condition worse, rather than better!

Next, carefully and completely remove the jellyfish's tentacles with protective gloves, tweezers, or another object, such as a shell, while avoiding direct contact with the jellyfish. Then, the stung skin needs to be liberally covered with vinegar or a paste of baking soda or unseasoned meat tenderizer (or seawater if none of these substances is available), for at
least 30 minutes or until symptoms improve. If you use meat tenderizer paste, an item some people in high jellyfish areas carry in their beach bags, apply it for no more than 15 minutes. This also helps inactivate any remaining venom.

If the affected skin has open sores, clean the area, treat it with antibiotic ointment, and cover the skin, several times a day, until it's healed. If itchiness continues, apply one percent hydrocortisone cream and/or take an over-the-counter antihistamine, such as diphenhydramine. For pain relief, taking acetaminophen or ibuprofen, applying an ice pack to the area, and using a topical anesthetic, such as benzocaine or lidocaine hydrochloride, can help.

Have the stung person see a medical provider right away if any of the following is noticed:

- The sting site is anywhere on the face or genitals or covers a large part of the body
- Symptoms remain the same or worsen
- Severe allergic reaction
- Nausea or vomiting
- Weakness
- Muscle spasms
- Headaches
- Difficulty breathing
- Chest pain
- Low blood pressure
- Stung person is very young or old in age

To help prevent jellyfish stings in the future, learn in advance which waters are highly populated with jellyfish and avoid them or come prepared. Wear protective gear, such as a wet suit or Lycra "stinger" diving suit, gloves, and goggles, covering as much of your exposed areas as possible while in the water. Also stay clear of jellyfish on land, jellyfish parts, or dead-looking jellyfish, as their poison can still be potent.

Alice!

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