

# Stinging Insects



PMC-10072

Alaska's mild summer weather means pleasant activities for most people, but for some it means fighting troublesome insects. Sucking and biting insects, such as mosquitoes and gnats, are an integral part of summer outdoor activities for most Alaskans. However, the presence of stinging insects—bees, wasps, and hornets—can cause serious problems that demand speedy solutions.

**Stinging insects are often found in areas frequented by people; our activities contribute to their well being.** They build nests on, in, or under our buildings. They feed on the crops we raise. In the case of the honeybee, we provide special homes for them so they will provide pollination and honey for us. It's not surprising that problems arise.

**Wild bees, wasps, and hornets cause the most concern; they are more aggressive than honeybees.** Honeybee behavior is strictly defensive and they cause no problem unless their hive is disturbed or we



make direct contact with the bee, such as stepping on one with a bare foot or swatting at one in a moving car. Another important aspect of honeybees in Alaska is that their presence depends on humans. Honeybees don't overwinter in tree cavities here like they do in other parts of the country. They must be reintroduced each spring or deliberately overwintered with human help. Our relationship with the honeybee is mutually beneficial.

**Wild bees, wasps, and hornets have an advantage; they survive our harsh winter conditions.** The entire swarm does not overwinter, like honeybees; only the mated queen survives. In the spring, she emerges from the sheltered location where she spent the winter and starts the new colony by herself.

**Nests are built in various places; they are found underground, in buildings, hanging from eaves or branches of trees.** Nests can be located close to human activity. These insects have a very active defense of their nesting areas and will react aggressively when disturbed. Combine this with our normal

summertime outdoor activities and problems are bound to occur.

**If you get stung, leave the area immediately.** Don't flail your arms (although that's easier said than done) because bees or wasps then become even more aggressive. If the sting was from a honeybee, the stinger and poison sac will probably still be attached. Scrape it out (don't pinch it) with your thumbnail or something similar. The honeybee can only sting once, but other bees, wasps and hornets can zap you repeatedly. After you have retreated to a safe place, you may want to apply a topical anesthetic to the sting to relieve the pain. Check with your doctor or pharmacist for recommendations.

Some people are seriously allergic to insect stings. If reactions occur in parts of the body other than around the location of the sting, it is an indication of allergic reaction.

Generalized swelling, urticaria (hives), difficult breathing, and swelling in the neck region are all indications that you need

medical attention immediately. Symptoms usually occur immediately after a sting, but can occur up to 24 hours later. These allergic reactions can be treated if they are diagnosed and correct medication is provided. If you know that you are allergic to insect bites or stings use extra precautions and talk to your doctor about first aid and medical requirements.

**OBTAIN MEDICAL ASSISTANCE IMMEDIATELY IF ALLERGIC SYMPTOMS ARE NOTED**

**If a nest must be destroyed, follow a few basic rules to avoid danger.** Do it safely and don't chance getting stung. The best time to deal with the problem is late evening after insects

are back in their nest. If you destroy a nest during the day, field workers will be very annoyed when they return home. Darkness is difficult to define in midsummer so be cautious.

When dislodging a nest, enclose the entire nest with a plastic bag before breaking the attachment. Close the bag in one movement, capturing the insects and the nest in the bag. Quickly twist the bag shut. This method works well, but isn't recommended for the nervous or shaky handed. The bag can then be placed in the freezer.

Wasp and hornet sprays are available for destroying these insects from a distance. Direct the spray into the nest opening and continue spraying until all activity in the nest stops and all the insects are dead. Remember, these are pesticides and all label directions must be followed. If the nest is underground, pack

the entrance with soil after the spraying is complete. Burning a nest is extremely hazardous. Don't take the chance of destroying your home or shed just to get rid of an insect nest.

**Experienced beekeepers are excellent sources of information.** They are usually knowledgeable about identifying these insects and know effective methods for capturing or controlling them. Although beekeepers work with honeybees, many are willing to help with a nuisance or potentially dangerous situation and often all they require is your appreciation.

This summer, be aware that stinging insects are taking advantage of the good weather too. Know what you can do to avoid uncomfortable situations. For additional information on these and other outdoor pests, contact the Cooperative Extension Service office nearest you.



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