

# Your Health

by Dr. Paul Roumeliotis

## Insect bites and stings, and reactions to insect venom

At this time of year, a lot of people, especially children, complain about mosquito bites that swell up, itch and cause discomfort. This is a reaction to the insect bite itself. While there are other hazards linked to the West Nile virus, I'm going to focus on the actual reaction.

Some people, particularly children with asthma or other allergies, tend to overreact to bites from insects such as mosquitoes, flies and fleas. It is important to know whether the reaction is local or if it extends beyond the bite area. Although less common than the symptoms of a local reaction, the symptoms of a systemic or "anaphylactic" reaction affect a larger area than that of the bite itself and include the following:

- sudden difficulty breathing
- weakness or loss of consciousness
- a rash accompanied by itching (hives) over the entire body, not only around the bite itself
- swelling of the face, especially in the lip and tongue area

Anaphylactic reactions typically occur following a sting by a bee, wasp or hornet, and are very serious. If someone is having this type of reaction, he or she must be seen by a doctor immediately, because it can be fatal. People who have had an anaphylactic reaction to an insect sting must carry a special medication containing adrenaline (EpiPen) to use in the event that they get stung. Those who have had a systemic (anaphylactic) reaction to an insect sting should also undergo allergy testing to determine which venomous insects they are allergic to. Only those allergic to a stinging insect are likely to have an anaphylactic reaction. The good news is that immunotherapy is available to treat allergies to bee, wasp and hornet stings, and has proven to be quite effective in curing or eliminating the allergy in question.

Luckily, most reactions to insect stings are local, not systemic. While local reactions may be uncomfortable, it is better for them to be local, and not widespread or systemic. In most cases, it is easy to distinguish between a local and anaphylactic reaction. However, if you're in doubt, don't hesitate to consult a physician.

### How to deal with a local reaction to an insect sting

Most reactions to insect stings can be treated easily enough by applying calamine lotion to the affected area. Giving antihistamines before exposure to insects does not seem to prevent sting reactions. Reactions to an insect sting usually disappear within one to three days. If the reaction persists or if the area gets redder or more swollen (with or without pus), these could be signs of a reaction to an infection that needs to be treated with antibiotics. The best way to avoid a reaction is to prevent the insect sting in the first place:

- Avoid using scented soaps, perfumes and hair sprays.
- Avoid wearing printed clothing with vivid colours.
- Wear pants and a lightweight, long-sleeved shirt when going to a place that has a lot of insects.
- Avoid places where insects can be found such as garbage cans and bodies of water (even puddles).
- Use an insect repellent containing DEET.

Lastly, remember that insect repellents do not prevent stings from bees, wasps or hornets.

*Dr. Paul Roumeliotis is the Medical Officer of Health for the Eastern Ontario Health Unit and Assistant Professor of Pediatrics, McGill University. © Dr. Paul Roumeliotis*