Dear Alice,

I've heard that there is a species of highly aggressive bees more prone to attack than the typical bee. Are there any precautions I can take to protect myself? I am highly allergic to bee stings. I carry an EpiPen but I am worried it won't be enough, especially if I am attacked by multiple bees at once.

Thank you,

Bee Afraid!

Answer

Dear Bee Afraid!,

Bees are some of the most complex and fascinating insects around. It may not be commonly known, but there are a variety of bees around the world, some of which are particularly aggressive when provoked. These are creatures with complex social structures, communicate through pheromones, and have ultraviolet vision. They're responsible for pollinating over half of all fruits and vegetables, which is a critical process for food production. But, alas, stinging insects can be dangerous, especially to people who are highly allergic. Bees are responsible for about 100 deaths per year due to allergic reactions. It's great that you carry an epinephrine auto-injector, especially since there have been more recent reports of shortages of the branded EpiPens. To answer your question about its effectiveness to address multiple stings, it depends on the type of auto-injector you have (single dose, multiple dose) and the number of stings you get. In any case, the injection will certainly help, but it may not provide enough medicine, so head to an emergency room if you're stung by several bees at once. There are steps you can take to reduce your risk of getting stung by any type of bee:

- While wasps and hornets sting for predation and defense, bees sting only for defense. So avoid swatting at or trying to kill a bee buzzing near you. Letting it "bee" is your best defense.
- If there's a beehive somewhere close to you, try to contact a local beekeeper! Check online for your local beekeeper, apiary, or honey farm as they're the experts at moving hives.
- If you see a swarm, don't panic. A swarm is simply a colony of bees that are searching for a new home. The majority of them will hang out somewhere while a few others are out scouting. Bees in a swarm tend to be less aggressive than when flying solo.
Try to avoid wearing fruit and flower-scented perfumes and lotions when you know you might be around bees. They'll be drawn to the smell and come close, increasing the chances of getting stung.

If by chance you're being chased by bees? run! They aren't very fast so try to get indoors where you can shut them out. It's best to avoid running toward people and or a body of water. Though it might seem like a good idea to jump into a body of water to avoid these flying fearmongers, they'll likely be waiting for you as you come up for air. Try to cover your face with a shirt or coat as you run, as this is one of the most uncomfortable areas to be stung.

There has been quite a bit of buzz about the Africanized honey bee, oft-referred to as the killer bee for its more aggressive and defensive tendencies. However, it's worth noting that though they're more aggressive than European honey bees, they're no more aggressive or venomous than wasps and yellow jackets. In fact, similar to the European honey bees, they're only able to sting once because their barbed stinger gets latched into the victim, along with half the bee's body. Compared to their European counterparts, the Africanized honey bees are better able to survive in unpredictable environments: they chase predators for longer distances, respond to signs of danger in their environment more readily, and the colony, once disturbed, may result in up to 20 times more stings than a disturbed colony of the common European honey bee found in most of the United States. In appearance, however, European and Africanized honey bees are not distinguishable without the aid of a microscope.

If you're stung by a bee or multiple bees, there are a number of steps you can take to reduce your risk of an allergic reaction becoming life-threatening. Keep in mind that having one type of reaction doesn't mean you?ll have the same reaction every time; however, if you've been stung by a certain species of bee in the past and are stung again by the same species, a heightened response may occur. A mild or moderate allergic reaction, which usually includes pain, swelling, or redness, can be treated through removal of the stinger and application of a cold compress, with over-the-counter pain medication taken as needed. A severe allergic reaction, which can include skin reactions (such as hives), nausea or vomiting, difficulty breathing, or swelling of the throat or tongue, is usually referred to as anaphylaxis and requires emergency treatment. Multiple bee stings can also induce a toxic reaction similar to anaphylaxis. This is where your epinephrine auto-injector comes into play.

Epinephrine auto-injectors work by relaxing the muscles in the airways and tightening the blood vessels to help the person experiencing anaphylaxis as they seek emergency medical treatment. The auto-injector you have is the most popular on the market. However, there are other companies that offer an auto-injector alternative, and non-automatic injection methods are available as well. As with most medications, epinephrine has an expiration date by which replacement is recommended, but the Federal Drug Administration (FDA) announced that due to the branded EpiPen shortage, the expiration date for certain brands of auto-injectors can be extended. The FDA also recently approved a generic epinephrine auto-injector that will hopefully ease shortages and cost barriers for those with life-threatening allergies. Incidentally, there are treatments designed to reduce one's sensitivity to bee sting allergies so it may be worth talking about it with your health care provider to learn if it's possible for you to reduce the severity of your reaction.

While it's wise to be careful around bees, especially if you're allergic, severe or deadly attacks aren't common. Have your injector nearby at all times, but keep enjoying the outdoors!
Bzzzzz,

Alice!

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