

Coping with Bee Stings

Copyright 2012 Carl J. Wenning

Bee Stings – If you work with bees, one thing is certain. You WILL get stung. To many beekeepers stings are nothing more than a nuisance – a nuisance well worth putting up with in light of the joy of keeping bees and the golden rewards. Most novice beekeepers are truly amazed by the gentleness of bees. That bees can be quite gentle is evidenced by the fact that many experienced beekeepers work their hives with little protection other than a bee veil. Bees die after they sting, and will generally sting only when they perceive that the colony is threatened. Bees away from the hive rarely sting unless provoked.

Reactions to Bee Stings – There are basically three major types of reactions to bee stings. Bee stings can range from nothing more than a minor irritation to life-threatening allergic reactions. Most beekeepers will have mild local reactions where, after a few minutes or hours, the symptoms associated with the bee sting disappear. Strong local reactions also can occur, most frequently in those who have had few encounters with defensive bees. Fortunately, these individuals usually show mild local reactions after a year of beekeeping. Unfortunately, some people exhibit life-threatening reactions that can lead to death if not properly and immediately treated. Refer to the accompanying handout *Normal and Allergic Reactions to Insect Stings* for additional details.

Managing Bee Stings – The first thing to do after being stung is to remove the stinger. Once a honeybee stings, she pulls away from the sting site leaving a venom sack which continues to pump venom into the wound. Remove this venom sack and the stinger by scraping underneath the venom sack. This often can be accomplished with the use of a fingernail or a hive tool. What ever you do, don't squeeze the venom sack as it will discharge venom into the sting site increasing the pain and other after effects. Many beekeepers will take a nonprescription antihistamine after being stung. This can reduce swelling. Some will apply topical remedies such as soothe swabs that help reduce the pain of the sting more quickly. Some beekeepers also keep on hand epinephrine inhalers that can be purchased across the counter in the event that an unexpected allergic reaction occurs. Those who are known to be allergic to insect stings will frequently carry the EpiPen injector.

Avoiding Bee Stings – Common sense and experience will go a long way toward helping the novice beekeeper avoid or reduce the number of stinging incidents. Keep the following factors in mind as you work your bees. Following these rules will do more than just about anything else to help you avoid or reduce the number of bee stings: (1) move slowly and deliberately around your bees, (2) avoid squeezing and crushing bees, (3) avoid working the hive on hot and humid days, (4) don't swat at flying bees, (5) don't stand in front of the hive entrance – work your hives from the side, (6) always wear appropriate protection including veil, bee suit, gloves, and boots, (7) avoid wearing dark-colored clothes, (8) use your smoker wisely, (9) smoke any sting site, and (10) work your bees at midday when foragers are afield.

