Fire Ants


Image source: United States Department of Agriculture

Fire ants are small aggressive insects which bite and sting, causing a severe burning pain.

They attack especially if their path or nest is disturbed. An individual ant may sting and bite more than once. Dozens or hundreds of stings from swarming ants can occur within seconds. This can be life-threating in people who are allergic.

Fire ants are reddish brown in colour and 2 to 6mm long. Their nests are found under rocks and logs or appear as mounds of dirt in open grassy areas or on sidewalks.


Image source: Australian National Fire Ant Eradication Program

Symptoms

The sting contains a venom that causes a painful burning sensation in the skin. The area swells, becomes red and itchy. Blisters which fill with white/yellow pus form within a day or two, which heal after several days. The wounds can become infected and may cause scarring.

People who are allergic to the venom may develop a severe life-threatening reaction (anaphylaxis). Anaphylaxis is a medical emergency. Symptoms of anaphylaxis include swelling of the throat or tongue, difficulty breathing, dizziness and collapse.

First Aid

- Move away from the ants and their nests.
- Brush any attached ants off your skin.
- Wash the area with soap and cold water. Do not break the blisters.
- If there are symptoms of anaphylaxis, call immediately for medical help. Use an adrenaline auto-injector if available.

Some methods to relieve pain, swelling and itch include:

- Applying an ice pack (covered with a cloth) or a cool wet compress.
- Using creams containing a local anaesthetic such as benzocaine, or hydrocortisone.
- Antihistamines.
- Pain relievers such as paracetamol/acetaminophen.

Risk for travellers

Fire ants are native to South America but have spread to areas within many countries, including the United States, China, Japan, the Philippines and Australia.

Prevention

If you will be in areas where the fire ants are likely to be present:

- Wear protective clothing – gloves, long sleeves, long pants, shoes and socks, and tuck pant legs into socks or boots.
- Look out for and do not disturb ant mounds. Look carefully before handling items that are on the ground.
- Report suspected fire ants to local authorities.

For more information:

Australia National Fire Ant Eradication Program
https://www.fireants.org.au/about-fire-ants

New South Wales Government Department of Primary Industries, Red Imported Fire Ant Resources
https://www.dpird.nsw.gov.au/dpi/biosecurity/invasive-plants-and-animals/insect-pests/rifa/resources

US Department of Agriculture, Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, Imported Fire Ants
https://www.aphis.usda.gov/plant-pests-diseases/ifa

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