
Tips for avoiding wasp stings

Beech forests in the northern South Island are often thickly infested with a native scale insect that produces honeydew. The sugary droplets are a perfect fuel for invasive European wasps (*Vespula vulgaris* and *V. germanica*), leading to some of the highest populations of wasps in the world. In late summer and autumn, there is a constant hum of wasps in these forests and the surrounding countryside. People moving about in these areas for work or recreation need to be aware of the danger, as a number of people suffer life-threatening reactions to wasp stings every year, although fatalities are rare.

The following guidelines will help you to avoid being stung.

- **Avoid disturbing wasp nests**

Most stings occur as a result of accidentally disturbing a wasp nest. Nests are typically found underground, and the vibrations caused by stepping on or close to the nest entrance are enough to trigger an immediate reaction. If you're walking through an area with high wasp numbers, always take note of wasp activity in front of you. If you notice a wasp shooting up or down, pause and watch for any others moving the same way at the same point, as this movement is typical of a wasp nest. Wasps that are simply foraging for insect prey move slower and less deliberately, and are not a threat to walk past. If two or more people are walking single-file, the lead person needs to pay special attention to where they are stepping, because if they disturb a nest it is usually the people following behind that are targeted by the angry wasps.

If a nest is discovered close to your intended path, walk slowly and quietly around it. Check the angle that wasps are flying in and out of the nest and avoid walking directly into the main flight path. If you walk gently and quietly, you can safely move past within a couple of metres of a wasp nest without triggering a defensive reaction.

Be aware that wasp nests are often clustered, and it is not unusual to have several nests occurring within a few square metres – so if you find one nest, check around the immediate vicinity for others before deciding on an avoidance route.

Nests can also occur in the hanging fronds of tree ferns, in hollow tree trunks, and in rotten logs, so people gathering firewood should check for wasp nests before swinging an axe or starting a chainsaw.



Photo: Richard Toft, Entecol Ltd

- **Be careful around black tree trunks**

Beech trees with honeydew have black trunks caused by sooty mould that grows on the sugar splashes. During the peak of the wasp season, the trunks and main branches of these trees can have large numbers of wasps on them. Sometimes the wasps demand for honeydew exceeds supply, and the wasps have so little energy that a slight knock on the tree trunk causes a shower of wasps to fall down.

If a wasp gets tangled in your hair or falls down your shirt, immediately slap it with enough force to kill it instantly. You can then remove the dead wasp. The brief pain from a sharp smack is much better than a wasp sting.

- **Check your food and drink**

Wasps often like the same foods we do, so if having lunch, picnics or barbecues in an area with wasps it pays to check your food before you take a bite. A wasp maybe sitting on your apple or sandwich, or may have entered your open can of softdrink or beer. If drinking from a bottle, replace the cap between drinks. *Stings in the mouth or tongue are particularly dangerous, as the swelling can restrict airways.*

- **Dress in light colours**

When a nest has been disturbed, wasps will often attack darker coloured objects rather than light ones. If you're in an area with high wasp numbers, wear trousers and long-sleeved shirts to reduce the risk of stings.

- **Don't over-react**

If a wasp simply lands on you, don't panic. Keep still. More often than not, they are simply resting to preen or are readjusting a load they're carrying, and will fly off again after a few seconds. In these circumstances, you are more likely to be stung if you begin wildly brushing it off. If a wasp enters your vehicle, calmly pull over to the side of the road and open the windows to allow it to escape. A number of road accidents have occurred through drivers reacting in panic to a wasp inside the car.

What to do if under attack from wasps

In the event that you do disturb a wasp nest, move away from the area as quickly as you can. In most cases, a short sprint of 20 metres is enough to take you out of the danger zone. If you still have wasps buzzing around you, move further away. If you have already received multiple stings, it pays to move rapidly through any nearby shrubs as you run away to help brush off any wasps still clinging to you.

Do not go back near a disturbed nest for at least thirty minutes, and if you must return past the nest, check that the wasps have stopped swirling around before moving past it again. Do not linger near the nest, especially if you were stung, as the scent of venom may trigger additional aggressive reactions.

If you are planning to spend time outdoors in an area with high wasp numbers, you should carry an appropriate first aid kit that includes an antihistamine to relieve reactions to insect stings. People known to be allergic and people working regularly in areas with high wasp numbers should carry EpiPens® or adrenalin kits during the wasp season, and have received training in their use. Dangerous anaphylactic reactions can occur unpredictably, even if you have not previously had allergic reactions to wasp stings. Life threatening symptoms can occur within minutes of being stung, so keep the kit with you, not left in the vehicle.