

European wasp

The European wasp (*Vespula germanica*) is native to parts of Europe, Asia and North Africa. Since the European wasp is an introduced species, it doesn't have natural predators in Australia to keep its numbers in check. In Europe, the cold winters ensure that only the Queen wasp can live, but the warmer climate of Australia means the entire nest can survive. Some nests may contain more than 100,000 wasps.

Lack of predators and good weather conditions means that the European wasp is an increasing problem in Australia. This insect likes to live around humans because of the ready supply of food and drink, particularly of the sweet varieties.

Physical characteristics of the European wasp

The characteristics of the European wasp include:

- Looks similar in size and shape to a bee
- Around 15mm in length (a Queen is about 20mm long)
- Bright yellow body with triangle-shaped markings
- Two long antennae
- The wings are folded when at rest.

Symptoms of a wasp sting

Unlike a bee, which can only sting once (and leaves the stinger behind in the skin), the European wasp can sting repeatedly. It emits a scent chemical (pheromone) that alerts other European wasps to attack.

The sting of a European wasp has certain features, including:

- Burning pain
- Raised lump
- Redness
- Local inflammation.

Severe allergic reactions

Although they are painful, isolated wasp stings seldom cause serious problems. However, the venom contains toxins that can cause allergic reactions in susceptible people. Around one in 10 people who are stung two or more times become allergic, which means they will experience severe reactions to any subsequent stings. The most severe allergic reaction of all is anaphylaxis, which may be life threatening.

Symptoms of anaphylaxis may include:

- Itchy, burning or reddened skin
- Swelling to the mouth, tongue or throat
- Difficulty breathing or swallowing
- Noisy breathing
- Abdominal cramps or nausea
- Sudden feeling of weakness or collapse
- Increased heart rate
- Palpitations, chest pain or tightness

- Strange metallic taste in the mouth
- Children may be pale and floppy
- Unconsciousness.

Since 2008, all licensed children's services and schools in Victoria are required to have an anaphylaxis management policy in place.

When to call an ambulance (000)

You should seek urgent medical attention if:

- A child is stung more than 5 times
- An adult is stung more than 10 times
- Anyone is stung in the mouth or throat, as swelling in these areas can block the airways
- There is a severe allergic reaction
- There is a history of an allergic reaction to European wasp stings.

First aid for less severe stings

First aid steps for less severe stings include:

- Clean the affected area with soap and warm water.
- Use a cold pack to reduce swelling and pain.
- Use pain-relieving medication and creams.
- Be alert for signs of anaphylaxis (see **Severe allergic reactions** above).
- Prolonged swelling at the site of the sting may respond to antihistamines – see your pharmacist for further advice.

First aid if allergic to wasp venom

Your doctor may advise you to carry self-injectable adrenalin (for example, EpiPen) if you have previously been stung by wasps. Anaphylaxis is a life-threatening reaction that can result in death from swollen airways.

First aid suggestions include:

- Call 000 immediately for an ambulance.
- If breathing stops, begin resuscitation immediately.
- Follow the person's emergency plan if they have one.
- Administer the person's own medication in the thigh.
- Apply a pressure immobilisation bandage over the site to restrict the spread of venom.
- Avoid all unnecessary movement.

Application of a pressure immobilisation bandage

This technique is **only for use in the instance of a severe allergic reaction** to these stings. It prevents the venom from the sting entering the bloodstream and lymphatic system.

- If the sting is not on a limb, firm direct pressure over the site may be beneficial.
- Otherwise, apply a firm broad bandage over the site, wrapping away from the heart.
- Further wrap the complete limb, from the fingers/toes towards the shoulder/groin. Wrap firmly but not tight.
- Splint the limb, including the joint above and below the sting if possible. **Do not remove** splint once it has been applied.
- Keep the person as still as possible.
- Bring transport to the person if at all possible.
- Do **not** use a tourniquet.

It is strongly advised that you attend a first aid course to enable you to deal with an emergency of this nature. If you have had a severe allergic reaction to a wasp sting, you will need specialist assessment for immunotherapy after your recovery.

How to locate the nest

It is strongly recommended that you hire experts to destroy any wasp nests on your property. This is particularly important if you have experienced an allergic reaction to a wasp sting in the past or if you have never been stung and are unsure of your allergy status to wasp venom.

It may help to locate the nest before you call your local council or pest controllers, since the nest may not be on your property. Suggestions on how to locate the nest include:

- The European wasp may forage for food up to half a kilometre away from its nest. You might need to seek the cooperation of your neighbours.
- Place food (preferably meat) in a visible outdoor location.
- Once it has located the food source, the wasp will fly virtually in a straight line back to its nest.
- If necessary, keep relocating the food source until you see the wasp fly into its nest.
- Nests are usually built in sheltered locations.
- Typical nest locations can include under the ground and within retaining walls, tree hollows and holes in walls.
- The nest looks like it's made of grey papier-mache.

Precautions against the European wasp

You can reduce the population of European wasps around your home and reduce the risk of stings in a number of ways.

- Don't leave food, drink or pet food outside.
- Pick up any fallen fruit.
- Ensure that your outdoor rubbish bins have tight-fitting lids.
- Cover compost bins.
- Cover food during a barbecue or picnic.
- Don't drink straight from a can or bottle when outside, as it could contain a wasp – drink from a straw.
- If you see a European wasp, leave it alone – it will only attack if provoked.

Where to get help

- In cases of severe allergic reaction, call triple zero (000)
- Hospital emergency department
- Victorian Poisons Information Centre Tel. 13 11 26 – seven days a week, 24 hours a day – for advice about poisonings, suspected poisonings, bites and stings, mistakes with medicines and poisoning prevention advice.
- Your doctor
- Pharmacist
- Your local council
- Pest controllers

Things to remember

- Unlike a bee, which can only sting once, the European wasp can sting repeatedly.
- Around one in 10 people who are stung two or more times become allergic, which means they will experience severe reactions to any subsequent stings.
- It is strongly recommended that you hire experts to destroy any wasp nests on your property.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Ambulance Victoria

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