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Bee Safety

Whether the Africanized honey bee turns out to be a minor problem or a major threat to the United States, there is no question that some individuals are going to experience the pain, and perhaps even the tragedy, of an encounter with them. Safety depends on knowing what to do long before the moment of crisis comes.

Bee Alert!

The best safety advice is to avoid an encounter with unfriendly honey bees. Be alert for danger. Remember that honey bee's sting to defend their colony, so be on the lookout for honey bee swarms and colonies. Be alert for bees coming in and out of an opening such as a crack in a wall, or the hole in a water meter box. Listen for the hum of an active bee colony. Look for bees in holes in the ground, holes in trees or cacti, and in sheds. Be extra careful when moving junk that has been lying around.

Be alert for bees that are acting strangely. Quite often bees will display some preliminary defensive behavior before going into a full-fledged attack. They may fly at your face or buzz around over your head. These warning signs should be heeded, since the bees may be telling you that you have come into their area and are too close to their colony for comfort both theirs and yours!

When you are outdoors, in a rural area, a park or wilderness reserve, be aware of your surroundings and keep an eye out for bees the way you would watch out for snakes and other natural dangers. But don't panic at the sight of a few bees foraging in the flowers. Bees are generally very docile as they go about their work. Unless you do something really outrageous, such as step on them, they will generally not bother you.

Bee Prepared!

There are a few things you can do to be prepared. One is to wear light-colored clothing. Experience has shown that bees tend to attack dark things. Dark clothing, dark hair, anything dark in color could draw the bees. A USDA entomologist says that when he inspected apiaries he could often tell that they were Africanized by the number of stings he got in his black leather camera case.

Avoid wearing floral or citrus aftershaves or perfumes when hiking. Bees are sensitive to odors, both pleasant and unpleasant. The smell of newly cut grass has been shown to rile honey bees.

Check around your house and yard at least once a month to see if there are any signs of bees taking up residence. If you do find a swarm or colony, leave it alone and keep your family and pets away. Look in the Yellow Pages for a pest control company or a local beekeeper to deal with the bees.

To help prevent honey bees from building a colony in your house or yard, fill all cracks and crevices in walls with steel wool and caulk. Remove piles of junk, honey bees will nest in an old soda can or an overturned flower pot. Fill holes in the ground, and cover the hole in your water valve box.



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Bee Attack!

Obviously, it is best to avoid contact with honey bees. But sometimes contact cannot be avoided. In that case, it is important to know what to do when stung.

Almost all cases of Africanized honey bee attacks can be traced back to some provocation, such as a kid tossing a stone at the hive, or some noise or vibration, such as that of a lawn mower, weed eater or tractor. Once disturbed by something, Africanized honey bees can range quite far from the source of irritation, attacking anything that looks threatening.

Once the bees get riled up, the most important thing to do is RUN away as fast as possible. Do not try to retrieve belongings nearby. Do not try to stand still in an attempt to fool the bees. That may work with a snake under certain circumstances, but honey bees won't be impressed. Do not try to fight the bees they have the advantage of numbers and the gift of flight. The more you flail your arms, the madder they will get. Just run indoors as fast as possible.

A bee can obtain speeds of from 12 to 15 miles per hour, but most healthy humans can outrun them. So, RUN! And when you run Keep Running! Africanized honey bees have been known to follow people for more than a quarter mile.

Any covering for your body, and especially for your head and face will help you escape. While outdoor enthusiasts can hardly be expected to go around in bee suits, a small hand kerchief or mosquito net device that fits over the head could easily be carried in a pocket. People who have been attacked say the worst part is having the bees sting your face and eyes. Any impairment of your vision will also make it more difficult to escape. So even though a net over your head may leave the rest of your body exposed, it will allow you to see where you are going as you run away from the colony or source of the bees.

If you do not happen to have a net with you, grab a blanket, a coat, a towel, anything that will give you momentary relief while you look for an avenue of escape. But the covering device is not going to protect you for long. The idea is to use it to help you get away.

If you have nothing else, pull your shirt up over your face. The stings you may get on your chest and abdomen are far less serious than those to the facial area.

Try to find shelter as soon as possible. Take refuge in a house, tent or a car with the windows and doors closed. Some bees are bound to enter with you, but it will be darker and probably cooler inside which will confuse the bees and you should be able to swat them or vacuum them up easily enough. Even if you do get stung a few times, remember that each bee can only sting once. As long as the number inside the shelter with you is small, you have the advantage.

Although it may be tempting, DO NOT JUMP INTO WATER! The bees will wait for you to come up for air.

Once you are away from the bees, take a second and evaluate the situation. If you have been stung more than 15 times, or if you are having any symptoms other than local pain and swelling, seek medical attention immediately. If you see someone else being stung or think others are in danger, call 9-1-1 immediately.

Many of the safety measures we have just reviewed would be difficult to apply under the excitement of an emergency situation if you have not mentally prepared yourself ahead of time. Most people taking part in normal outdoor activities do not have to go to any extraordinary lengths to be prepared, just keep in mind where you would go to escape honey bees, and be on the lookout for danger.