



Fire Ants

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When there is flooding, it is common to spot clusters of fire ants floating through flood waters. This common phenomenon occurs as ants attempt to protect their queen, eggs, larvae and pupae by forming a mass around them. When floodwaters push fire ants from their anthills, they can cling together to create a waterproof mound that can float until it hits a hard surface. This surface could be land, debris floating in the water, a roof or a person.

What should you do if you see fire ants (floating or not floating)

It is advised that you avoid fire ants. When these floating mounds of ants contact a hard surface they attempt to recolonize. They take refuge on anything that is higher ground than the water. This is problematic for boats, and people who are in the water if these mounds come in contact with them.

It is also advised to not push these mounds underwater. Since they are looking for higher ground if you come in contact with them they will instantly disperse onto the person or object pushing them.

Therefore, the best method to protect yourself is to avoid them and not mess with them. If you find yourself unable to escape their path, try to create waves to wash them away from you.

What to do if they are on you?

If the ants manage to get on you or a boat you are on, you should avoid jumping into the water. If the ants are on you, and you jump into the water, the ants may cling to you more and increase the chance of them stinging you. Once one stings you, they release a pheromone that makes the other ants sting you at the same time.

It is better to try and brush the ants off to the best of your ability. Once you brush them they tend to roll up and it is the easiest way to get them off of you.

What happens when they bite?

If you disturb fire ants, they may become aggressive and bite or sting humans by attaching to the skin with their jaws. Their bites inject a stinging venom that burns and develops into red bumps which after a few days turn into fluid-filled pustules (pimples/abscesses). A fire ant sting often begins with an intense pinching or burning pain immediately after the sting, some say feels like they are on fire. This pain is short-lived, lasting anywhere from a few seconds to a few minutes and is followed by itching or burning. Although bites may go away in a week, scratching the bites could lead to infection.

Persons who have been bit by fire ants could experience allergic reactions/anaphylaxis from the toxins injected by bites. In these cases seek immediate medical attention. Itching tends to get stronger over

the next few days, but most stings heal on their own without treatment. If you are stung or bitten by a fire ant you can use an epinephrine pen or antihistamines to tolerate the symptoms.

You should be aware that allergies to insect bites can be deadly, therefore, if a sting causes severe chest pain, nausea, severe sweating, loss of breath, serious swelling, or slurred speech it is recommended to take the worker to an emergency medical facility immediately.

Worker Recommendations

Workers should take the following steps to prevent fire ant stings and bites:

- Do not disturb, stand on or go near ant mounds. If you see an ant mound stay away from it, or get out of its way if in the water.
- Be careful when lifting items off the ground or from flood waters, as they may be covered in ants.
- Fire ants may also be found on trees or in water, so always look around the area before starting to work.

If you are bit:

- Treat mild sting reactions by washing the affected area with soap and clean water and then cover with a bandage.
- Applying ice can reduce the pain as well as over-the counter steroid creams and antihistamines to reduce pain and itch.
- If swelling occurs after bites seek immediate medical attention, especially if swelling occurs on face, airway, hands, feet, or if mobility becomes impaired in anyway.

Resources:

1. NPR: <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/31/547541719/what-to-do-when-facing-a-floating-ball-of-fire-ants>
2. The Verge: <https://www.theverge.com/2017/8/29/16221842/hurricane-harvey-houston-fire-ants>
3. NIOSH: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/topics/insects/fireants.html>
4. Health Line: <http://www.healthline.com/health/fire-ant-bites#outlook7>