

# FIRE ANTS



Severe flooding can cause mounds of fire ants to float through flood waters. This occurs as ants attempt to protect their queen, eggs, larvae, and pupae by forming a mass around them. Flood waters can push fire ants up from their anthills, causing them to 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.

## PROTECTION

- Do not disturb, stand on, or go near ant mounds.
- Avoid direct contact with floating fire ants, even with a boat oar or pole.
- Do not push fire ant mounds underwater. This may cause them to disperse onto the person or object pushing them.
- Wear protective clothing, including long sleeves, long pants, rubber boots, and cuffed gloves during the cleanup in water or on land.
- Limit exposed skin as much as possible.
- 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.
- Dust all tool handles before using.

## CONTACT

- If fire ants get on you or a boat you are on, avoid jumping into the water as this may cause the ants to cling to you more and increase the chance bites/stings. When fire ants sting, it releases a pheromone that makes the other ants sting at the same time.
- Try to brush ants off you quickly to the best of your ability.

## BITES/STINGS

- 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 it 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.

## FIRST AID

- 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 of face, airway, hands, or feet occurs, or if mobility becomes impaired in any way.
- Persons who have been bitten 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.
- 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.

## REFERENCES

NPR: <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/08/31/547541719/what-to-do-when-facing-a-floating-ball-of-fire-ants>.

CDC NIOSH: <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/docs/2010-117/default.html>.

Health Line: <https://www.healthline.com/health/fire-ant-bites#outlook7>.