

Caterpillars (or Asps) with Poisonous Spines

In the Health Center, we have seen a rash of stings from caterpillars with sharp, hollow, poisonous spines. Contact with these spines causes a burning inflammation of the skin, but can be more serious when in contact with a mucous membrane or the eyes. The spines from dead caterpillars are still poisonous.

Typically, the contact area is the skin, which becomes red, burning, tingling, and sometimes numb and swollen. Serious reactions are rare, but can occur. These reactions include difficulty breathing, swelling of the airways, headache, nausea, vomiting, and moderately severe pain. One should seek immediate medical care for these serious reactions, as they could be life-threatening.

Most of the caterpillars feed on the leaves of various hardwood trees and shrubs. There are about 25 species. The three most common are the Puss caterpillar, the Saddleback caterpillar, and the Hag Moth caterpillar. The Puss caterpillar may be pale yellow, grey, or reddish brown, about one inch long and densely covered with hairs. Among these hairs are hollow spines with venom. Stings on the hand can cause the entire arm to swell and become numb. There is severe pain followed by itching. The Saddleback caterpillar is green with a brown mark on its back. It has fleshy knobs on its body with venom-filled spines. The Hag Moth caterpillar is a brownish caterpillar with four pairs of long plume-like projections on the back projecting out the sides and suggesting the disarranged hair of a hag. Among the brown hairs on the plumes are longer black stinging hairs.

Medical treatment is available on campus for students, faculty, and staff at the UH Health Center. Treatment involves treating the area of inflammation by removing the venom spines. This can be achieved by pressing scotch tape over the entire wound and then removing the tape. This may need to be repeated more than once. Use calamine lotion several times a day at the contact site for comfort from itching. Take antihistamines like Zyrtec 10mg tablet or benedryl 25mg tablet and use an ice pack on the wound site. Use Advil or Ibuprofen 2 every six hours for the pain. As mentioned earlier, seek immediate emergency medical treatment for symptoms of allergic life-threatening reaction such as breathing difficulties, severe headaches, nausea and vomiting, and moderately severe pain. When in doubt, visit the UH Health Center or contact the physician on call through the UH Police Department after hours and on weekends and ask to speak to the physician on-call.

We at the Health Center will be happy to help you.



Healthfully yours,

Dr. Healthberry

For questions or comments you can;

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