

## PRECAUTIONS COULD REDUCE BEE STING RISKS

Above average precipitation for the Rio Grande Valley in spring 2015 has led to a thriving population of Africanized honey bees that can be aggressive toward humans and animals.

Many emergency service departments have experienced an increase in responses to bee attacks as a result. Some preventive measures and routine precautions can reduce the likelihood of serious bee attacks, according to entomologists. The safest advice is to avoid honey bees and be informed about how to respond to the possible danger they may pose.

Do not panic at the sight of docile bees foraging among flowers or other plants because bees are generally peaceful as they go about their activity. Unless a person does something like swat at them, step on them or roll over them with a lawnmower, bees usually will not bother a human.

Experts recommend that people who regularly venture outdoors – whether in yards, parks, vacant lots or wilderness areas – should wear light-colored clothing because bees tend to attack dark objects, including dark hair. Avoid wearing floral or citrus after shave or perfume because bees are sensitive to odors. Bees can build a colony or hive in places like a hole in a tree, bush, cacti or an overturned flower pot. The insects also find shelter in sheds, gain access to structures through cracks in a wall or a hole in a water meter box.

The sound of humming bees can be a warning sign. Be alert around bees acting strangely because they often display defensive behavior before making an attack. For example, they may fly at a person's face or fly around a person's head. These warning signs tell humans they're too close to a hive or colony.

Preventive actions include checking around a home and yard at least once a month to see if there are signs of bees taking up residence. Cracks or crevices in walls should be cleaned with steel wool and filled with caulk. Remove debris such as wood piles, tires, old cans and discarded containers. Fill holes in the ground and cover water valves. If a swarm or colony is found, keep people and pets away from it. Then, get a pest control company or a local beekeeper to deal with the bees.

Africanized honey bee attacks usually begin with some form of disturbance or provocation like a grass trimmer, lawn mower or tractor. Bees also react to a loud noise, a strong vibration, or someone tossing an object at a hive. Riled up bees can follow the source of the irritation. That's why it's important to quickly run away and put a long distance between the potential victim and the bees. African honey bees have been known to pursue a person for more than a quarter mile, but most healthy people can outrun them.

Any temporary covering – a handkerchief, shirt, blanket, coat, towel – for the head and face aids the escape. People who have suffered from intense bee attacks by a swarm report that the stings to the face and eyes are especially painful, so eye protection is important to maintain vision during the escape. Taking off a shirt to shield the head and face may allow some stings to the chest, stomach and back, but the tactic keeps the face and eyes safe.

Try to find shelter quickly. Get inside a house, tent, or car with the windows and doors shut. A few bees might enter the shelter, but that will reduce the odds of serious injury because each bee can only sting once.

Do not jump into water because some species of bees will wait for the target to come up for air.

After reaching safety, a person should evaluate the circumstances. Medical attention should be sought if a person is stung multiple times or if they are having any symptoms other than local pain and swelling.

Call 9-1-1 if a person is being stung repeatedly and there is a serious health danger or a life-threatening risk. Less serious bee encounters can be treated at home or with measures advised by consulting a medical office.

Bees are a valuable part of nature's pollination cycle. Bee specialists provide live, safe removal and relocation instead of extermination to help maintain the environmental balance.

For more information about risks associated with potential colony or hive activity, there are numerous online resources or call the City of Harlingen Health Department at (956) 216-5220.