



Australian Venom
Research Unit

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factsheet

Honeybee (*Apis mellifera*)



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Honeybees are found throughout Australia. Most people suffer a single sting with minor, local effects. For people with bee venom allergy, the possibility of a life-threatening reaction means a sting can be very serious. People who have a known allergy should always carry adrenaline (Epipen™) in situations where they are at risk of a sting. Beekeepers, their families, outdoor workers and those with a heart or lung condition (high blood pressure, asthma) are particularly at risk.



First aid for bee sting is to remove the sting and apply ice packs or cold water.

People with known allergy should immediately self inject adrenaline (Epipen™) and call an ambulance (Tel 000).

Distribution Found throughout Australia.

Habitat They are found in a wide variety of habitats, from urban backyards to desert. In drier areas they sometimes cause problems crowding around water sources.

Behaviour Proximity to the hive, agitated or dramatic movements, and physical contact will all prompt a bee to attack. Airborne chemical signals released by a single bee will induce others in the vicinity to also attack. Stings are more likely in daylight, particularly on hot days.



Appearance The head and thorax of a bee are black, and the abdomen is striped black alternating with brown, yellow or orange. Honeybees can be readily distinguished from wasps by the hairiness of their abdomens and the lack of colour anywhere but the abdomen. Honeybee stings have a barb which causes the sting apparatus to remain in the skin when the bee pulls away, killing it.

Clinical Importance To a person without allergy to bee venom, honeybee stings are only serious when they number over 50 in an adult or over 10 in a child. In such cases, headache, nausea and vomiting, and impaired kidney function may result. In allergic persons, anaphylaxis is a possibility, causing 1 to 2 deaths per year in Australia. It is characterised by itching, faintness or loss of consciousness, difficult or noisy breathing, wheezing or coughing, and swelling of the tongue, face, head and neck. Children can become pale and floppy. *This is a medical emergency and requires immediate hospitalisation.* It is therefore essential that such persons carry an adrenaline injection (Epipen™) whenever they might be at risk of getting stung. It is also advisable to instruct friends and family in its use.