

## Newsflash - 2017 10

14 June 2017



Every employee and contractor, working for Northern Powergrid, should go home at the end of each shift uninjured and in good health after a productive days work

## Working in Proximity of Stinging Insects

In September 2016, a Northern Powergrid linesman escaped injury when the Toyota Hilux he was driving left the road and collided with a BT pole. An investigation into the accident identified that while at a nearby worksite, a wasp's nest had been disturbed. A number of wasps entered the cab of the Toyota while it was parked. After the linesman drove away, he became so distracted by the presence of the wasps, fearing that he may be stung, that he lost control of the vehicle.



This newsflash is to draw attention to the risks associated with encounters with large numbers of stinging insects, in particular wasps and how to deal with those risks. Other insects that might be encountered include bees and hornets.

### IMPORTANT THINGS TO REMEMBER:

- TRY TO AVOID DISTURBING WASPS NESTS. IF A NEST IS DISTURBED, IT MAY PROVOKE AN ANGRY RESPONSE FROM THE WASPS INSIDE TO ATTACK AND STING AS A FORM OF DEFENCE.
- INSECT STINGS CAN BE VERY PAINFUL AND FOR A SMALL NUMBER OF PEOPLE CAN CAUSE A SEVERE ALLERGIC REACTION THAT IS LIKELY TO REQUIRE EMERGENCY MEDICAL TREATMENT.
- AVOID KILLING WASPS. DYING WASPS EMIT A PHEROMONE WHICH ACTS AS A SIGNAL TO OTHER WASPS THAT THEY ARE UNDER ATTACK. OTHERS WASPS ARE LIKELY TO BE ATTRACTED.
- WASPS LIKE BRIGHT COLOURS AND STRONG SCENTS. THEY OFTEN DRINK MOISTURE FROM WET TOWELS AND CLOTHES SO BE EXTRA CAREFUL WHEN HANDLING SUCH ITEMS. THEY ARE ALSO ATTRACTED TO THE SMELL OF SWEAT SO WEAR DEODORANT IF IT'S HOT AND HUMID.
- WHEN IN THE VICINITY OF WASPS, KEEP STILL IF POSSIBLE OR MOVE SLOWLY. FLAPPING HUMAN ARMS ARE LIKELY TO ATTRACT ATTENTION FROM WASPS.
- IF YOUR VEHICLE HAS BEEN PARKED WITH THE WINDOWS OR DOORS OPEN CHECK FOR WASPS OR HORNETS BEFORE GETTING IN AND DRIVING OFF.



Honey Bee



The Common Wasp

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## Differences between Wasps, Hornets and Bees.

It is quite easy to confuse wasps and hornets with bees however it is important to be able to distinguish between different species of wasps, hornets and bees because honey bees are protected under law.

The Common or Social Wasp and the German Wasp are the wasps most likely to be found in homes or businesses. Other wasp species are also considered pests but are far less common, e.g. the European Hornet. This is a large, fat, round and surprisingly noisy version of the common wasp. It does pack a powerful punch in its sting – the sheer volume of venom is considerable when compared to the common wasp but its supporters claim that despite its fearsome appearance and sound, they are not typically as aggressive.



The Common Wasp

Wasps have much less hair on their bodies than bees. They also have a tighter waist between the thorax and abdomen than bees. Wasps are sometimes mistaken for hornets as they are similar in appearance, but wasps are smaller in size. Wasps have distinctive yellow and black markings on their bodies. They have three main body parts; the head, thorax and the abdomen. Worker wasps vary in size from 12-17mm.

There are several species of bee common to the UK. Bumblebees are larger, rounder and have more body fur than other bees. They are social creatures that live in colonies sometimes underground and sometimes just above ground in dense grass or leaf-litter. Tree bees are darker and usually have a black abdomen with a white tail. Tree bees tend to nest in disused bird boxes or in parts of buildings. Solitary or Masonry Bees are also darker in colour, similar to the Tree Bee but without the white tail. As the name suggests, they are solitary creatures that nest in a variety of cavities. They also burrow through soft mortar. Honey bees are small by comparison and vary in colour from golden brown to almost black.



Honey Bee

Swarming is the natural way that a colony of honey bees reproduces. It happens when a new queen has been formed and is almost ready to emerge from her cell. The parent queen and flying bees leave their nest rather than wait for the offspring to leave and set up independently. In preparation, honey bees gorge on honey prior to their journey in search of a new nest site. When they are ready to leave, the bees leave the nest and can appear as a cloud in the air. They are easier to spot when they are resting as a cluster with the queen at their centre. Without her, there is no future for the colony. The resting place for a swarm can be in the most unusual places and should not be confused with a wasp nest. Swarming bees have little interest in people when in this mode. Their priority is to find a safe place to set up their new colony, so humans have little to fear from them. However, honey bees should still be treated with respect and caution – they are wild insects and also a protected species.

In most cases, it is only the female of the species that can sting. When a honey bee stings, the sting, venom sac and venom pump are left in the skin after the bee pulls away. The honey bee subsequently dies. Wasps and bumblebees can sting repeatedly.

Wasps make their nests from chewed wood pulp and saliva, giving them distinctive papery walls. When a Queen wasp starts to build a nest in spring it is usually quite small, about the size of a walnut or golf ball. As summer progresses the nest grows rapidly in size, as the number of wasps increases. A mature nest can grow to the size of a football, or even bigger in some cases, containing many thousands of wasps.

Nests are usually built in sheltered spots with easy access to the outside. They can often be found in cavities in walls or trees, in roof spaces, under eaves, in bird boxes, sheds or garages. To locate a nest, carefully watch the flight path of the returning wasps, this becomes easier later in the summer as the numbers of wasps increase.

Wasps and their larger but less common relation, the hornet, will typically only sting if their flight path is blocked, a person is moving rapidly or should a nest be disturbed it may provoke an angry response from the insects inside to attack and sting as a form of defence. Insect stings can be very painful and for a small number of people can cause a severe allergic reaction that is likely to require emergency medical treatment.

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## Treating insect bites and stings

### First aid for insect bites and stings

- Remove the sting, tick or hairs if still in the skin (see below for advice about how to do this safely).
- Wash the affected area with soap and water.
- Apply a cold compress (such as a flannel or cloth cooled with cold water) or an ice pack to any swelling for at least 10 minutes.
- Raise or elevate the affected area if possible, as this can help reduce swelling.
- Avoid scratching the area or bursting any blisters, to reduce the risk of infection
- Avoid traditional home remedies, such as vinegar and bicarbonate of soda, as they're unlikely to help.
- The pain, swelling and itchiness can sometimes last a few days. See below for advice about how to relieve the symptoms of an insect bite or sting in the meantime.

### Relieving the symptoms of an insect bite or sting

- If you have troublesome symptoms after an insect bite or sting, the following treatments may help:
- For pain or discomfort – take over-the-counter painkillers, such as paracetamol or ibuprofen (children under 16 years of age shouldn't be given aspirin).
- For itching – ask your pharmacist about over-the-counter treatments, including crotamiton cream or lotion, hydrocortisone cream or ointment and antihistamine tablets.
- For swelling – try regularly applying a cold compress or ice pack to the affected area, or ask your pharmacist about treatments such as antihistamine tablets.
- See your GP if these treatments don't help. **They may prescribe stronger medicines such as steroid tablets.**

### When to get medical advice

#### Contact your GP or call NHS 111 for advice if:

- you're worried about a bite or sting
- your symptoms don't start to improve within a few days or are getting worse
- you've been stung or bitten in your mouth or throat, or near your eyes
- a large area (around 10 cm or more) around the bite becomes red and swollen – your GP may refer you to an allergy clinic for further tests or treatment (read about treating allergies)
- you have symptoms of a wound infection, such as pus or increasing pain, swelling or redness – you may need antibiotics
- you have symptoms of a more widespread infection, such as a fever, swollen glands and other flu-like symptoms.

### When to get emergency help

- Dial 999 for an ambulance immediately if you or someone else has symptoms of a severe reaction, such as:
- wheezing or difficulty breathing
- a swollen face, mouth or throat
- nausea or vomiting
- a fast heart rate
- dizziness or feeling faint
- difficulty swallowing
- loss of consciousness
- Emergency treatment in hospital is needed in these cases.