

Biosecurity Response

Red imported fire ants

Solenopsis invicta



November 2023

Information for medical practitioners in NSW

Fire ants are small (2 to 6 mm) invasive ants from South America that cause extreme economic, environmental, and social impacts

- They are not known to be present in NSW but are under eradication in Southeast Queensland (SEQ) and have recently been found close to the NSW border.
 - The presence of fire ants (www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fire-ants) in NSW is notifiable under the *NSW Biosecurity Act 2015*.
 - **Medical practitioners must immediately notify the NSW Department of Primary Industries if they suspect or confirm a patient has been stung by fire ants in NSW by reporting the case to the [NSW Biosecurity Helpline 1800 680 244](tel:1800680244).**
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Medical diagnosis helps inform early detection

- Fire ant stinging attacks are most likely to occur in northern NSW, close to the border with SEQ, but could occur elsewhere in NSW.
- If ants are present on a person, collect a specimen for identification.
- Wear latex gloves to prevent stings. Using a tissue, collect the ants and put them in a jar which can be sealed and place in the freezer.



Characteristics of fire ant attack

- Fire ants are aggressive and will swarm and attack people and animals if disturbed.
 - Tens to hundreds of ants can swarm onto a person within a few seconds and sting simultaneously, injecting venom that causes a painful local reaction.
 - Each ant can deliver multiple stings. It's possible, but unlikely a person would be stung only once or twice.
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Characteristics of fire ant stings

- Stings may initially appear as raised welts or hive-like lesions associated with intense burning, itchiness and redness.
- Small pustules or blisters usually develop at the sting site after a couple of hours or up to two days later. These may be itchy and take up to 10 days to heal.
- Some people may develop severe swelling at the sting site.



Systemic allergic reactions

- Severe allergic reactions and anaphylaxis can occur following fire ant stings.
- Severe reactions and anaphylaxis may be more common in people previously stung by fire ants or who have a history of allergic reactions to insects.



Treatment of fire ant stings:

- use simple analgesia and a cold compress or ice to relieve swelling and pain
- wash the affected area with soap and cool water and advise patients to keep the sting site clean
- keep the blisters intact to prevent infection. Advise patients to avoid scratching
- antihistamines can be considered to manage minor localised reactions and itching
- topical or oral steroids can be considered for large, localised reactions
- manage anaphylaxis immediately with adrenaline, as per standard anaphylaxis protocols
- call 000 and refer to an Emergency Department if severe symptoms appear
- call the Poisons Information Centre 131 126 for clinical advice



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