

Take the Sting Out of Bees for Your Pet
By Dr. Beth Saldivia DVM
reprinted with approval from Bissell, Inc.

Have you ever wondered why your pet plays with bees, seeming to think they are as innocuous as flies or June bugs? I have often wondered this when I see so many pets with bee stings - sometimes in the same pet over and over. Late summer or early fall is a common time for dogs or cats to come in contact with bees. These are usually annoying situations with some swelling and pain around the sting area that resolves in 4-6 hours. However, sometimes these stings can turn nasty with more serious consequences.

Bees typically sting when they or their nests are harassed or threatened. They inject a stinger with venom into the victim under the skin. The stinger can continue to release venom for up to 20 minutes if not removed from the skin. The tissue in the area responds with swelling. Since dogs are often biting at the bees they tend to get facial or mouth swellings, whereas cats sometimes exhibit swelling in the front legs from pawing at them. When trying to determine if your pet has been stung, look for soft swelling that feels "squishy" and that has come up very suddenly. If the swelling is in the face or mouth, you may see severe swelling, such as half of a face swollen out of recognition. Drooling is also common. If the swelling is in the feet, lameness is usually the first sign.

The most common concern after a bee sting is trying to make your pet comfortable until the swelling comes down. If you suspect a bee sting, look quickly for a stinger, which will appear as a black center surrounded by redness within the swollen area. If you can find this, remove it as quickly as possible with your fingers or scratch it out with the edge of a card. It is important you do not squeeze the venom around the stinger out into the wound. In my experience it is very difficult to find a stinger in any pet with much hair, as they don't want to hold still for this. Still, it is worth looking. The next step is to apply cold compresses to the area which helps reduce swelling and makes the pet more comfortable. Antihistamines are helpful if the swelling is severe. Call your veterinarian to get a recommendation on what to use, as some over the counter antihistamines can be dangerous to pets with certain conditions. Some folks prefer to use home remedies such as baking soda and water mixtures or vinegar. I would be careful with any topical medication for pets as they love to lick these areas and will probably ingest most of a topical applied after a bee sting.

Some pets have more severe reactions to bee stings. Stings close to the face or in the mouth can cause difficulty breathing by closing down the air passages. If your pet is having difficulty breathing or seems very distressed, it is time to get to your veterinarian or veterinary emergency hospital immediately. A small minority of pets has severe (anaphylactic) responses to bee stings, which will cause weakness, shock and collapse. If you find that your pet is in this group, it is important to have an injection with you that you can give immediately. Your veterinarian can supply this for you.

Bee stings, although annoying, are for the most part a normal part of having a pet. I suspect most pets are not going to stop playing with

bees, so having the knowledge to help them after they are stung should be helpful.