

Welcome to Texas: Avoiding the Sting of Fire Ants

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Around these parts, when you step in something soft, it's one of two things. Neither is pleasant, but only one can hurt you . . . fire ants.

Avoiding red imported fire ants can save you from painful stings, a trip to the doctor, and, for some, even death.

WHY ARE FIRE ANTS SO BAD?

Thousands of fire ants live in each mound of soft soil. If a mound is disturbed in any way, ants rush out in large numbers, climb on whatever is disturbing the mound, and begin stinging. Each ant hangs on with its mandibles (jaws) and can sting many times (for more information on stings, see [Medical Problems and Treatment Considerations for the Red Imported Fire Ant](#)).

Fire ant stings burn like fire (hence the name "fire ant"). Often, there is localized swelling at the site of the sting. Within a few days, a small pustule forms where the stinger was inserted into the skin, and the area often is itchy. Pus-

tules are sterile while intact, but scratching can open them and lead to secondary infection.

Some people are sensitive to fire ant venom, causing the sting area and sometimes an entire finger, foot, hand, or limb to become swollen. Others are so allergic to the venom that a sting can cause a serious, life-threatening allergic reaction.

HOW CAN I RECOGNIZE FIRE ANTS?

Red imported fire ant workers are various sizes— $\frac{1}{8}$ - to $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch. They are reddish-brown and black and have 2 nodes and 10-segmented antennae with a 2-segmented club (see [Texas Pest Ant Identification: An Illustrated Key to Common Pest Ants and Fire Ant Species](#)). The workers (all sterile females) are the ants within the colony that will sting.

Reproductive ants are larger than workers and sometimes have wings. Queens are large with reddish-brown and black bodies; males are black with enlarged thoraxes. Males and queens aren't often seen except during or shortly after mating swarms. Mating occurs on warm, moist days, often after rain or irrigation occurs. Males die after mating; queens chew off their wings and find a site to dig a cell to begin a new colony.



WHERE ARE FIRE ANTS FOUND?

Red imported fire ants infest the eastern two-thirds of Texas and all of the southeastern United States (see *Geographic Distribution of Fire Ants*).

They live in colonies, preferring to build the mounds in open, sunny areas. Mature colonies build large, dome-shaped mounds that can contain more than 200,000 ants. When the weather gets hot or dry, the ants tunnel deep into the soil to find cooler temperatures and water, causing their mounds to be unnoticeable and making it seem as if the ants disappear. After heavy rain, numerous mounds will pop up because the ants are trying to move out of the water-saturated soil.

Mounds are often built next to sidewalks, roads, or anywhere fire ants can find food or water. Look for fire ant mounds around areas such as fallen objects on the ground, flowerbeds, landscaped areas, parks, playgrounds, sports fields, and tree trunks or roots.

HOW CAN I AVOID FIRE ANTS?

The best way to avoid fire ants is to be aware of your surroundings. Everyone living in Texas gets stung by a fire ant or two occasionally.

WATCH YOUR STEP! The only way to avoid being stung is to pay attention to where you're standing. Serious incidents occur when a person unknowingly allows dozens of fire ants to get on them, usually when they stand on a mound for more than a few seconds.

Most serious incidents are the result of inattention. People get stung while

- taking or posing for photos,
- sightseeing,
- leaning against fence posts, talking,
- picking up food or trash that has been on the ground for a time,

- sleeping on the ground (even in a sleeping bag or tent),
- sitting around a campfire, or
- gardening.

Children are fascinated by mounds and watching the fire ants “boil up” when disturbed. If kids can see the fire ants, they are close enough to have ants up their legs in seconds. Mobility-impaired individuals and infants are vulnerable to fire ants since they can't escape. Be very careful where you park wheelchairs and strollers. **DO NOT** place babies or carriers on the ground for any length of time.

WHAT DO I DO IF I GET FIRE ANTS ON ME?

- **DON'T PANIC!** Remove them quickly. The most effective way to remove fire ants from the skin is with a fast, repetitive brushing motion.
- **DON'T** try to shake them off; you can't.
- **DON'T** try to rinse them off with water. It makes them hold on and sting in another spot.
- **DON'T** be shy (Texans understand!). **QUICKLY** strip off shoes, socks, and clothing where the fire ants are stinging you. Shake out the clothing and inspect every fold before putting them back on. It is possible for fire ants to stay hidden for hours.

WHAT DO I DO IF I GET STUNG?

There is nothing that can make fire ant stings disappear. Fortunately, most people just suffer a burning sensation, itching, and pustules with no lasting effects. The important thing is to watch for severe reactions. Some people find that ice, cold compresses, and/or painkiller sprays and ointments help ease the burning and itching. Treat the pustules, whether intact or open, like any other small wound.

Immediately go to the nearest emergency room or doctor if a stinging victim feels faint, loses

consciousness, has severe swelling, or has trouble breathing. These are signs of a severe allergic reaction and can be life-threatening.

Watch for problems if a person

- ◆ is stung more than a few times,
- ◆ is a child (they not only have worse reactions from fewer stings, but tend to scratch open the pustules and get infections),
- ◆ has had reactions to other insect or arthropod stings,
- ◆ has had fire ant stings in the past,
- ◆ has other severe allergies,
- ◆ has an impaired immune system.

Fire ants are a fact of life in Texas. Simply being aware of their presence is the best way to stay safe.

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REFERENCES

Medical Problems and Treatment Considerations for the Red Imported Fire Ant
u.tamu.edu/ento-005

Texas Pest Ant Identification: An Illustrated Key to Common Pest Ants and Fire Ant Species
u.tamu.edu/ento-001

Geographic Distribution of Fire Ants
www.extension.org/pages/9725/geographic-distribution-of-fire-ants

Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas
www.extension.org/pages/11004/managing-imported-fire-ants-in-urban-areas-printed-version

Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control
www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/e-628.htm

Fire Ant Control: The Two-Step Method and Other Approaches
www.agrilifebookstore.org/product-p/ento-034.htm

For more information regarding fire ant management, see Extension publications *Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas*, *Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control*, or *Fire Ant Control: The Two-Step Method and Other Approaches* posted on <http://AgriLifeBookstore.org>.

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