



# 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**



Shown actual size.

Avoiding red imported fire ants can save you from painful stings, a trip to the doctor, 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, hundreds of ants rush out in seconds, climb on whatever disturbs them, including humans, and begin stinging. Each ant hangs on with its mandibles and can sting many times (see [FAPFS023](#)).

Stings immediately burn like fire (hence the name “fire ant”). The site then swells to about a half-inch across and can itch for hours. Then, usually overnight, small pustules form that can burst and become infected until they heal days later.

Some people are sensitive to fire ant venom. The stings on these individuals grow much larger and may cause an entire finger, foot, hand, or even limb to swell. A few people suffer life-threatening allergic reactions to a few stings.

## **Where are fire ants found?**

Quite simply, “everywhere.” The eastern two thirds of Texas and all of the southeastern U.S. are infested (see map).

Fire ants generally inhabit open, sunny areas often next to sidewalks, roads and anywhere they can find food or water. Be especially careful around areas such as:

- picnic sites and restrooms
- roadsides (changing a tire, sightseeing)
- garbage receptacles
- fallen limbs or objects on the ground

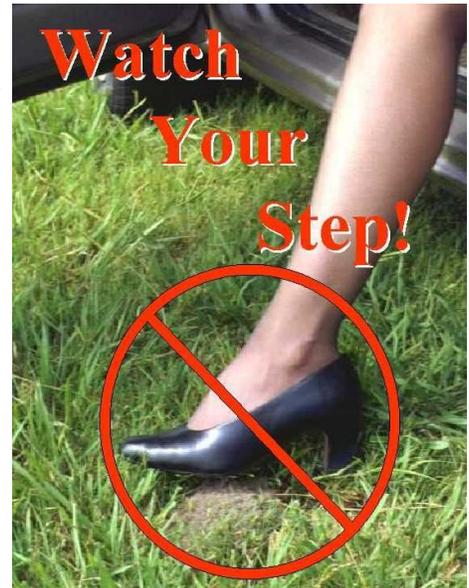
## **How can I avoid fire ants?**

Everyone living in Texas gets stung by an ant or two occasionally. Unless you're highly sensitive, it's no big deal!

**WATCH YOUR STEP!** The only way to avoid being stung badly 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 in 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



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 fire ants up their legs in seconds. The mobility-impaired 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.

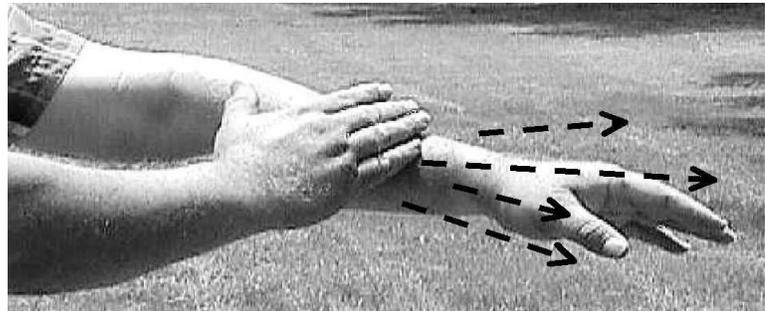
#### **What do I do if I get fire ants on me?**

**DON'T PANIC!** Remove them quickly. The most effective way to remove fire ants from 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 near the fire ants. Inspect every fold before putting them back on, ants can stay hidden for hours.



#### **What do I do if I get stung?**

There is nothing that can make fire ant stings disappear. Fortunately, the vast majority of people just suffer the burning sensation, itch and pustules with no lasting effects. The important thing is to watch for severe reactions.

***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 the victim:**

- 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

Some people find that ice, cold compresses and/or pain-killer sprays and ointments help ease the burning and itching. The pustules, whether intact or open should be treated like any other small wound.

**Don't let one of these . . .**



Fire ant mounds at a road side picnic area.



Fire ant mound in sidewalk.



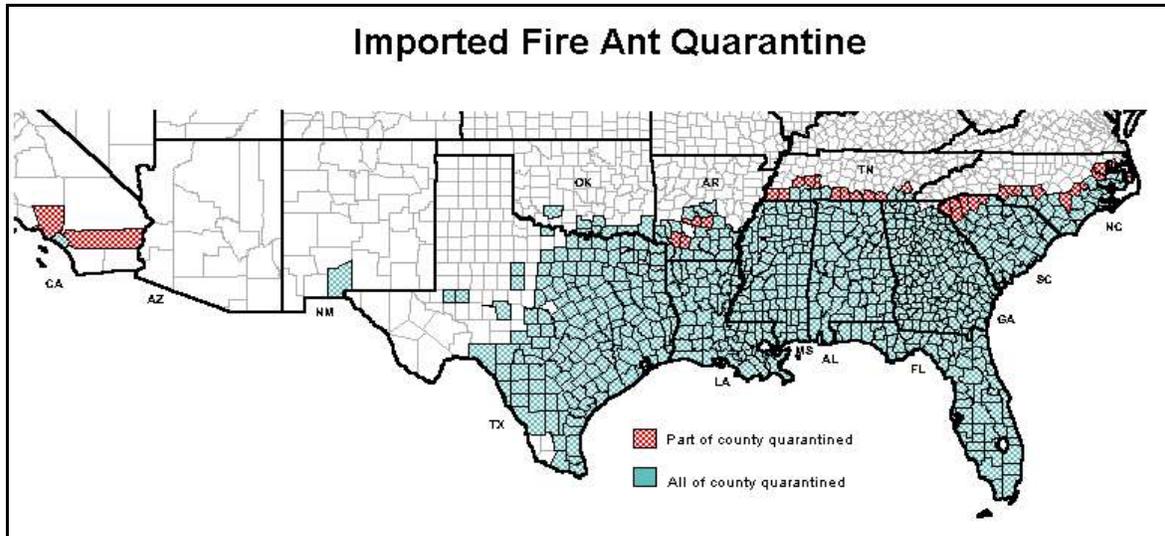
Heavily infested cattle pasture in Central Texas.

**Turn into this . . .**



Day-old stings on hand of a young child.

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



### **Acknowledgment**

This fact sheet was initially developed as a leaflet using funding provided by the Texas Department of Transportation. This fact sheet was reviewed by P. Nester, N. Riggs and B. Drees.

**For more information regarding fire ant management, see Extension publications [B-6043, Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Urban Areas](#); [B-6076, Managing Red Imported Fire Ants in Agriculture](#); [B-6099, Broadcast Baits for Fire Ant Control](#); or [L-5070 The Texas Two-Step Method Do-It-Yourself Fire Ant Control for Homes and Neighborhoods](#). Also visit our web site at <http://fireant.tamu.edu>.**

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