



How to Treat a Sting from a Stinging Nettle

Expert
Reviewed

Three Parts: [Cleaning the Area](#) [Taking Measures for Relief](#) [Knowing When to Seek Medical Attention](#)

The stinging nettle is a plant found practically all over the world. The plant is considered an herbaceous perennial, meaning that it has herbal properties and grows back in the same areas year after year. The leaves and stems of the plant are covered with brittle, hollow, hair-like structures. The stinging hairs act a lot like a hypodermic needle when your skin brushes against them. Chemicals flow through the hollow tubes and cause a nasty stinging sensation and a rash. The sting and rash from the plant are painful, but can be treated.

Part
1

Cleaning the Area

- 1 Avoid touching the area at first.** If possible, do not touch or rub the affected area for 10 minutes. Pour fresh water over the area without touching. Even though the pain can be intense during the first few minutes, by avoiding any touching or rubbing, you may prevent the pain from lingering for days.^[1]
 - The chemical irritants from the plant can dry on the surface of the skin, then they can be removed by soap and water. By avoiding any rubbing or touching at first, the chemicals are not pushed further into the skin, which can cause the painful reaction to last longer, possibly even days.^[2]
 - The chemicals released by the plant include acetylcholine, histamine, serotonin, moroidin, leukotrienes, and possibly formic acid.^[3]
- 2 Use soap and water.** Soap and water cleans the affected parts of the skin, and removes the chemicals released by the plant that cause the pain, swelling, redness, and itching. In many cases, once the area is washed, the pain either goes away completely, or is greatly reduced.^[4]
- 3 Use a clean cloth.** If you are not near soap or water, use a clean cloth to gently remove dirt and plant debris from the area until it can be more thoroughly cleaned.^[5]
- 4 Apply tape.** Lightly apply a strong tape, like duct tape, to the area involved, then remove the tape. This can help to remove any remaining fibers that may be lodged in the skin.^[6]
- 5 Try a wax hair removal product.** If the tape did not remove all the unwanted plant material from the skin, you can try using a wax hair remover.^[7]
 - Apply a layer of the wax removal, let it dry for about 5 minutes, then gently peel off the wax, taking the plant debris along with it.^[8]

Part
2

Taking Measures for Relief

- 1 Know what to expect.** The stinging, burning, pain, and itching, is quite intense. The duration of the symptoms varies from person to person, and varies depending on the initial measures taken to clean the area as just described.^[9]
 - The rash looks similar to hives, with raised areas of whitish blisters. The entire area can appear swollen and inflamed, with a reddish tint to the area affected.^[10]
- 2 Use leaves from other plants.** Applying the juices contained in the leaves from either a dock plant or jewelweed plant may help. These plants often grow in the same areas as the nettle plant. Locate either plant, and crush a few leaves to release their juices. Apply the crushed leaves to the area affected.^[11]

- The actual science behind the use of plants to treat this condition is very limited. Yet, this has been common practice in treating a sting from a nettle plant for centuries.^[12]
- A dock weed plant commonly grows in the same general areas as the stinging nettle plant. The plant grows in height from 20 inches to about 50 inches, and the leaves grow to be about 16 inches long. The leaves are very large, oval, have rounded tips, and have a wavy look to the edges. The lower leaves have a reddish color to their stems.^[13]
- A jewelweed plant is the same plant as an impatiens. These plants also grow naturally in the same areas where you may come across a stinging nettle. The chemical content found in the juice from the leaves and stem of a jewelweed plant is reportedly effective at counteracting the sting from a stinging nettle.^[14]

3 Avoid scratching. The areas can itch quite strongly, but try to avoid scratching. Scratching can irritate the area even further, possibly break the skin, and cause the symptoms to linger.^[15]

- For young children, you may want to put soft gloves or mittens on their hands to help avoid scratching. Also keep nails short.

4 Use cool compresses. Keep the area covered with cool compresses to help provide some relief from the stinging. The cooler temperature can help to reduce the redness and relieve some of the discomfort.^[16]

5 Apply a paste made from baking soda. Using just baking soda and water, make a paste material and apply to the rash. Use cold water in your paste. The paste can help to relieve some of the itching, inflammation, and the burning sensation.^[17]

- Apply any treatments gently to the area by using a dabbing motion to prevent further irritation.^[18]

6 Use aloe vera. Apply the juice from an actual aloe vera plant leaf, or use a manufactured product with high concentrations of aloe vera. Using aloe vera can help to manage the red and inflamed areas, and reduce the burning sensation.^[19]

7 Avoid hot temperatures. Take baths or showers in cooler water, and avoid applying anything warm to the area. Cooler temperatures are more soothing and help to reduce the redness and inflammation.^[20]

8 Use over-the-counter products. Topical creams, ointments, or lotions, containing hydrocortisone can help to reduce the redness and stop the itching.^[21]

- Apply over-the-counter topical products containing hydrocortisone to treat the rash. Follow the package directions. A rash that includes redness, itching, and inflammation may persist since the skin has been injured from the direct contact from the stinging nettle plant.^[22]
- Calamine or Caladryl® lotion can help to provide a soothing feeling and help to reduce the itching and burning.^[23]
- Over-the-counter oral antihistamines might also help to counteract the reaction that is occurring in your body. Available products include agents such as cetirizine, or Zyrtec®, loratadine, or Claritin®, and diphenhydramine, or Benadryl®.^[24]
- Apply antibiotic creams or ointments. Products are available over-the-counter that contain a mixture of anti-infective agents. Apply the antibiotic cream or ointment directly to the areas involved. The coolness of the product will have a soothing effect, and the active properties of the cream or ointment can help prevent infection.^[25]
- You can take an NSAID pain reliever for pain as long as you have no contraindication.

Part 3 Knowing When to Seek Medical Attention

1 Seek immediate medical attention if allergic symptoms develop. In rare cases, someone may be allergic to the plant or to one of the chemicals released. Allergic reactions can be life-threatening. Immediate medical attention is warranted.^[26]

2 Recognize an allergic reaction. Call 911 or go to the emergency department right away if you see one of the following symptoms of an allergic reaction:

- Difficulty breathing, wheezing, or feeling like your throat is tightening.
- A tight feeling in your chest that makes it hard to breathe.
- Swelling in your mouth area, including your lips or tongue.
- A rash that extends beyond the exposed area, and can be all over the body.
- Stomach upset, cramping, vomiting, or diarrhea, can sometimes be part of an allergic reaction.

3 Contact your pediatrician if a young child is exposed. Your doctor may be able to help guide you by prescribing topical medications or suggesting ways to treat the symptoms specific for young children.


4 Call your doctor if your symptoms are severe. If the areas of skin exposed to the plant are widespread, or if your symptoms do not improve in 24 hours, contact your doctor. Your doctor may prescribe prescription strength topical agents to treat the exposed areas, or stronger oral products to help resolve the reaction systemically.

5 Seek medical help if the areas look infected. If the areas have been scratched and the skin is broken, it is possible for an infection to set in.

- If you have areas of broken skin that are warm to the touch, draining pus, or more inflamed than the surrounding areas, then you may be developing an infection. Call your doctor right away if you experience these symptoms or if you have a fever. Your doctor may prescribe a topical antibiotic cream or ointment, or may want you take a course of oral antibiotics.


Community Q&A

How long does it take for the rash to stop itching?

 The itching should subside within 24 hours. If the rash is still itching after 24 hours, you might be experiencing an allergic reaction, either to the stinging nettle itself or to one of the treatments. In that case, you could consult a doctor.


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Can I get scars from stinging nettles?

 Yes, if the affected area is infected, or the skin underneath is exposed.


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Can I get stinging nettles from sand or soil, or just the living plant?

 No. You can only get stung by the living plant. There may be other chemicals in the air, however. Consider visiting your doctor to see if there is something you might be allergic to.


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Why do nettles still sting in winter?

 The season does not affect the stinginess. It's the chemicals in the trichomes (the hollow hair-like structures on leaves and stem) that cause the problem.


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Can the sting cause joint pain?

 It might be an allergic reaction. Go and see your doctor so they can check over the affected area.


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I was stung by a nettle plant several years ago and it still itches. Does this mean that fibers may still be in the skin since the initial contact wasn't treated properly?

 No, the chemicals causing the irritation would have truly decomposed by then. It is possible that you have eczema, psoriasis, or even a memory of the itch that is relived whenever you feel stressed. See your doctor for specific advice.

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How do I treat a regular itchy plant?

 Anti-itch creams are helpful. I prefer Benadryl. Make sure you are not allergic to the ingredients. If symptoms worsen or

last longer than a week, consult a doctor.

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Can someone die from a stinging nettle sting?

Only if the stung person were severely allergic, in which case the sting could result in anaphylactic shock.

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Why is this life threatening and dangerous?

There is a possibility of life threatening allergic reactions, resulting in shortness of breath, tightness in chest, and swelling of lips, tongue, and throat.

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What should I do if I don't have tape?

Make a baking powder and cool water paste. Dab it on and leave it for a few minutes. When you remove it, hopefully nettle fibers will be in the dried paste.

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Tips

- Try not to scratch the area, as this can cause the irritation to get worse.
- Clean and treat the area promptly. Continue to apply treatments as long as the area is uncomfortable.
- The stinging sensation can last from half an hour to a few days, depending on the sensitivity of your skin.
- If one remedy does not help, then try another.
- Contact your doctor if your symptoms are severe, widespread, and if they change or worsen. Don't overlook the valuable help your healthcare professionals can provide, especially if children are involved.
- You can apply vinegar to the affected areas by dabbing it on with a clean cloth.
- Soaking aged tea in a bath with some salts lessens pain.
- Think about something that you love to take your mind off the itching, this might keep you from scratching and get it to heal faster.
- Usually nettles are along rivers or moist areas. If you get stung, go right onto the river and apply the mud or the dirt from the river bottom and rub it into the affected area two or three times if necessary.

Sources and Citations

1. <http://wildflowerfinder.org.uk/Flowers/N/Nettle%28Stinging%29/Nettle%28Stinging%29.htm>
2. <http://wildflowerfinder.org.uk/Flowers/N/Nettle%28Stinging%29/Nettle%28Stinging%29.htm>
3. <http://wildflowerfinder.org.uk/Flowers/N/Nettle%28Stinging%29/Nettle%28Stinging%29.htm>

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