Caterpillars are the *larvae*, or immature phase, of moths and butterflies. There are thousands of species of caterpillars. Most are harmless to people. But some species can sting or irritate the skin if touched. These *urticating*, or stinging caterpillars have hollow, venom-filled bristles or hairs called *setae* (SEE-tuh) on their body. These hairs are a defense mechanism against predators. When something—or someone—brushes against the caterpillar, tips of the setae break off and the venom oozes out or is injected under pressure.

Most people react to caterpillar venom the same as a bee sting. They may experience redness, swelling, burning, itching, and pain that can radiate out from the site of the sting.

**SPECIES of STINGING CATERPILLARS FOUND IN VIRGINIA INCLUDE:**

A. **Saddleback caterpillar** (Photo: Blue Ridge Poison Center.)

B. **Puss caterpillar** (Photo: www.pixabay.com)

C. **Io moth caterpillar** (Photo: QueenOfFrogs https://commons.wikimedia.org)

D. **Buck moth caterpillar.** (Photo: Judy Gallagher - https://commons.wikimedia.org)
Rarely, some people may experience a more severe allergic reaction to the venom, such as nausea, vomiting, hives, headache, breathing difficulty, or seizures. If any of these symptoms are present, emergency medical attention is required right away.

Otherwise, follow these steps to relieve the pain from contact with a stinging caterpillar:

- Apply adhesive tape lightly over the area and gently pull off to remove broken-off spines from the skin. Repeat several times using fresh pieces of tape.

- Wash the area with soap and water.

- Ice packs may relieve pain and swelling.

- Over-the-counter topical steroids (hydrocortisone cream) may provide relief from itching and burning.

- Over-the-counter oral antihistamines may provide additional relief from symptoms.

**ALSO GOOD TO KNOW:**

- Don’t rub or touch your eyes if you have handled a caterpillar. Setae in the eye can cause tearing, irritation, and damage to the eye.

- Swallowing a caterpillar can result in mouth or throat irritation or pain, drooling, or difficulty swallowing. It might also a choking hazard.

- In rare cases, the setae of a very large infestation of caterpillars or moths can become airborne, and cause breathing difficulty, coughing, wheezing, and chest pain for sensitive individuals nearby.

For help with any suspected poisoning or overdose. 1-800-222-1222 or www.poisonhelp.org. Fast, free, private.