

Caterpillars

Get the Facts! From the Blue Ridge Poison Center at UVA Health

Caterpillars are the *larvae*, or immature phase, of moths and butterflies. There are thousands of species of caterpillars.

What is the problem?

Most caterpillars are harmless to people. But some species can sting or irritate the skin if touched. These stinging caterpillars have hollow, venom-filled bristles or hairs called *setae* (SEE-tuh) on their body. The *setae* provide defense against predators. When something—or someone—handles or brushes against the caterpillar, tips of the *setae* break off and the venom oozes out or is injected under pressure. There are six species of stinging caterpillars native to Virginia: the Saddleback, Io moth, Puss, Buck Moth, Hagmoth, and Hackberry Leaf Slug. (See page 2 for more images).



Hackberry Leaf Slug (also known as: White Flannel Moth caterpillar)



Rash left on an arm after contact with a Hackberry Leaf Slug caterpillar.

Most people react to caterpillar venom the same as a bee sting. It is unpleasant, but tolerable. They may develop a rash with swelling, burning, itching, and pain. Occasionally blisters may develop.

How to Treat a Caterpillar Sting

The first step is to remove any *setae* that may still be clinging to the skin. *You might not be able to see them with the naked eye.* Apply adhesive tape lightly over the area and gently pull the tape off. 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) and antihistamines may provide additional relief. If you have questions, the Blue Ridge Poison Center can help: 1-800-222-1222.



The Blue Ridge Poison Center at UVA Health www.brpc.virginia.edu

Caterpillars (continued from front)

In addition to the Hackberry Leaf Slug caterpillar featured on the first page, here are 5 other species of stinging caterpillars native to Virginia. (Images courtesy of Wikimedia Commons)



Io moth caterpillar



Puss caterpillar



Hagmoth caterpillar



Saddleback caterpillar



Buck Moth caterpillar

When to Seek Help

Some people may experience a severe allergic reaction to the venom. Symptoms may include nausea, vomiting, hives, headache, breathing difficulty, or seizures. If any of these symptoms are present, emergency medical attention is required right away. You may want to seek help also if someone is stung in the eyes or mouth.