

Lionfish Envenomation

The lionfish (*Pterois volitans*) is a tropical fish belonging to the Scorpionfish family and native to the Pacific and Indian Oceans. They have recently been observed and captured off the East Coast of the United States, most likely from the release of captive fish. These uniquely beautiful fish are often purchased in pet stores or on websites and placed in home aquariums. Poisonings primarily occur when owners are stung on the hand when handling the fish or cleaning the aquarium; however, divers and fisherman in the Atlantic have also been stung.



Lionfish have distinctive red, maroon and white zebra-like stripes, fan-like pectoral fins and long dorsal spines. Adults can grow to 18 inches in length. There are glands in the base of the spines which release a venom when disturbed. The venom, a complex mixture of proteins, travels along the spine and is injected through a puncture wound created by a spine.

Immediately after being stung, excruciating, throbbing pain occurs at the sting site and radiates to the affected extremity. The pain peaks in intensity in 60-90 minutes and can persist along with variations in sensation for hours, days, and sometimes weeks. Edema, erythema, ecchymosis, pallor, and induration may be visible. Systemic effects are rare and include headache, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain, diaphoresis, dyspnea, hypotension and syncope.

Treatment consists of immersion of the affected area in hot (110°-113° F) but not scalding water for 30-90 minutes or until the pain subsides. The venom appears to be heat labile and inactivated by heat. Oral analgesics, local wound care and supportive care for systemic effects should follow if needed.

Call the Maryland Poison Center for assistance in identifying and managing fish stings: 1-800-222-1222.

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DID YOU KNOW THAT... There were over 2800 exposures to fish and other aquatic life reported to poison centers in 2003?

These exposures included stings from scorpionfish (lionfish, zebrafish, stonefish, weeverfish), catfish, leatherjacks, stingrays, coelenterates (jellyfish, sea anemones, sea nettles, corals), sponges, and cone shells. Most resulted in minor-moderate effects such as pain, local wounds and mild systemic symptoms.



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If you do not wish to receive faxes or emails from the Maryland Poison Center, call 410.706.7604 or circle your fax number and fax this back to 410.706.7184. Supported by Maryland Department of Health and Mental Hygiene