

PORTUGUESE Man-of-War



Photo: Kevin Krutzen

WHAT IS IT?

The Portuguese man-of-war is a siphonophore (hydrozoan, not a true jellyfish), an animal made up of a colony of organisms working together. The man-of-war has four separate polyps (bladder, tentacles, digestive and reproductive). It gets its name from the uppermost polyp, a gas-filled bladder, which sits above the water and somewhat resembles an old warship at full sail.

WHERE ARE THEY FOUND?

Man-of-wars are found floating in warm waters throughout the world's oceans. They are primarily found in tropical and subtropical oceans, but strays can be found up the Eastern Atlantic coast as far north as the Bay of Fundy (Canada). They drift on the currents or use their bladder to 'sail' with the wind.

HOW BIG DO THEY GET?

Their bladder or float can be up to 12 in (30 cm) long and 5 in (12.7 cm) wide; the tentacles can be very long, but average length is 30 ft.

WHY ARE THEY IN NJ WATERS THIS YEAR?

Sightings of the Portuguese man-of-war is unusual, and there have not been any sightings in the past several years. They are most likely stray individuals that were blown into shore from the Gulf Stream, a warm water current that comes up from the Gulf of Mexico and carries fish and other animals north along the coast. New Jersey experienced north and northeast winds before the sightings began, which tend to push them towards shore.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT THIS SUMMER?

The number of tropical species that we see in our waters, especially those that use the currents and winds, will depend on wind direction and duration. It is possible to see more tropical species if the winds are out of the north or northeast (Coriolis force pushes objects to the right). Winds out of the south or southwest will tend to keep them offshore.

WHAT SHOULD I DO IF STUNG?

The sting of the Portuguese man-of-war is caused by the release of neurotoxins from stinging cells on the animal's tentacles called cnidocytes. Stings can be caused when a person makes contact with the tentacles and consequently with the cnidocytes. The inflammatory response resulting from stings is due to the release of histamines from mast cells within the person's skin. The result is often a lashlike welt, swelling, and/or rash-like response in the immediate area of contact. Pain is the most immediate result of contact with the man-of-war.

ACCORDING TO HEALTH EXPERTS, IF YOU ARE STUNG:

- If symptoms are severe, seek medical attention immediately.
- If possible, advise lifeguards or other beach personnel that you have been stung.
- Avoid further contact with the Portuguese man-of-war and carefully remove remnants of the tentacles from your skin; do not touch them directly with fingers or any other part of the skin to avoid secondary stinging, use latex gloves or other protective hand wear.
- First rinse with salt water to the affected area (not ocean water). Vinegar, or other "old folk remedies" are **not** recommended for man-of-war stings, since they may increase the delivery of toxins into the affected area.
- Follow up with the an application of hot water to the affected area for 15 to 20 minutes, not cold water which tends to worsen the pain.
- Finally, antihistamines can help alleviate hypersensitivity to the toxins, which essentially is an allergic response.

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