



Regional Center for Poison Control and Prevention

Serving Massachusetts and Rhode Island



Arachnophobia

By Avery Adam, MA/RI Regional Center for Poison Control and Prevention

You may have read the recent news headlines about black widow spiders. There are primarily two spiders in the United States that are harmful to humans: the brown recluse and the black widow. Occasionally a brown recluse or black widow will make its way to this part of the country. Usually the spiders are only “passengers” in boxes, crates or even cars that have originated from warmer climates. Bites from all spiders can result in mild redness and pain; treatment consists of washing the wound and applying an antibiotic ointment. A cool compress may help. The victim should seek medical attention if there are signs of an infection, an ulcer that does not heal, or a bite is accompanied by nausea, vomiting, fever, rash, or if severe pain or cramping spreads from the bite to other parts of the body.

Black widow spiders (*Latrodectus*) measure approximately one-half inch in length and have a shiny black body with red, yellow, or orange markings on the abdomen. This mark may assume an hourglass appearance. Only the female spider is a danger to humans. Black widows may be found in Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and the southern parts of Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont. However, true black widow spider sightings or bites are uncommon in New England. If a black widow spider bites, do not panic! No one in the United States has died from a black widow spider bite in over 10 years. Very often, no serious symptoms develop. Black widow bites may go unnoticed or feel like a sharp pinprick. These spiders may bite more than once and may hold on for a few seconds. The wound site may show one or two small puncture wounds. Within 20-40 minutes the patient usually experiences a dull ache or numbing sensation near the bite site. Pain progresses and spreads to the abdomen (stomach cramps), back, and extremities. If muscle cramps develop or pain is severe, take the patient to the nearest hospital. Some victims need to be evaluated at a healthcare facility. There is treatment for a black widow spider bite that can take care of the symptoms. Various medications are used to treat the muscle cramps, spasms and pain of a bite. Black widow spider antivenin is seldom necessary, but may be considered in very young children, the elderly or pregnant women if they do not respond to standard therapy.

The brown recluse (*Loxosceles reclusa*) measures approximately two-fifths of an inch in length, with long legs (3/4"). A dark violin shape located behind its three pairs of eyes gives it the name "fiddle back" spider. Color may range from yellow to pale or dusky brown. Most active at night, this shy, solitary spider is called a "recluse" because it hides and is not commonly found out in the open. The brown recluse is not native to any of the New England States. "Brown recluse spider bites" in this area of the country are usually caused by other spiders or bugs, or are other medical, non-bite, problems. At first, the bite of the brown recluse may go unnoticed, although slight pain has been reported. Within the first hour, a local burning/stinging sensation develops. The bite area becomes red and skin temperature increases. Within four hours, the area exhibits a "bull's-eye" appearance, forming a blister in some cases. This blister may rupture in 8- 36 hours, creating an ulcer. There is no special treatment or medication used to treat a brown recluse spider bite. If infection develops, antibiotics are used. If a wound becomes deep and infected, occasionally surgery is needed. Anytime there is a bite or a wound that is not healing and getting worse, see a physician for evaluation.

PREVENTION OF SPIDER BITES:

- Keep attics, garages, and basements clean.
- Wear gloves, shoes, and socks when gardening, cleaning the garage, or cutting/carrying firewood.
- Do not leave soiled shoes outside where spiders may crawl in.
- Inspect and shake clothing before use. Do not hang clothes against walls.
- Seal small openings where spiders may enter house.
- Place bed so it doesn't touch the wall.
- Avoid reaching into dark closets, boxes or other places where spiders may live without looking first.

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