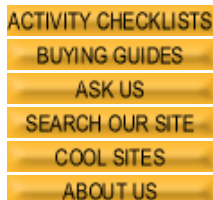


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Spider Bites: First aid and prevention.

by Buck Tilton

Few people rejoice to learn that almost all spiders, worldwide, carry venom which can be injected through nasty fangs. On the positive side, only a few dozen species have a bite harmful to humans, either because they inject too little venom or their fangs cannot penetrate human skin.

One of the most venomous, the black widow, at least four species of which are common in the United States, bears the tag "cosmopolitan," a spider found around the globe. Only the shiny female, two to 2.5 cm in length, poses a threat, and she packs more danger in every drop of venom than any other creature in North America. The typically red "hourglass" shape on her abdomen helps identify her. She has been found in every State but Alaska, secreting her tattered web under logs and large pieces of bark, in stone crevices, in trash heaps and outbuildings, deep in clumps of heavy vegetation. Rarely aggressive, she may be touchy during springtime mating and egg-tending days.

Her drop of poison is tiny, a huge boon to bitten humans. Victims almost never feel the bite, although some have reported immediate sharp pain. There may be little or no redness and swelling at the site initially, but a small, red, slightly hard bump may form later. Within 10-60 minutes symptoms usually begin to occur. Pain and anxiety become intense. Severe muscular cramping often centers in the abdomen and back. Burning or numbness characteristically disturb the victim's feet. Watch for headaches, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, heavy sweating-- common reactions.

It feels like, say victims, you're going to die, but black widows kill very few humans, only two to four during an average year in the United States, and they are almost always the very young, the very old, or the very allergic.

If you find yourself a rescuer, keep the victim as calm as possible and you'll be "applying" perhaps your best first aid treatment. If you can find the bite site, wash it, and apply an antiseptic such as povidone- iodine. Cooling the injury, with ice if possible, with water or wet compresses if necessary, will reduce the pain. Cold also reduces circulation which slows down the spread of the venom.

Evacuation a medical facility is a great idea, just in case complications arise. Most people will receive painkillers and eight to 12 hours of observation. Youngsters, oldsters, and the very sick may be admitted for longer. Antivenin is available if needed.

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