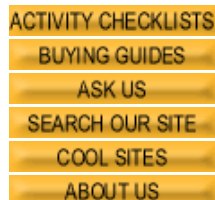


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Brown Recluse Spiders: Avoiding the bite.

by Buck Tilton

Black widow is the stuff of nightmares and legends, but the most common serious spider bite in the United States is not from her venom. Instead, look for the solitude-seeking recluse (a.k.a., fiddleback, violin spider). Generally pale brown to reddish, with long slender legs two to three cm in length, they most often have the shape of a violin on the top front portion of their body. The head of this "fiddle" points toward the tail of the spider. Unlike the black widow, both sexes of recluses are dangerous.

The recluse prefers the dark and dry places of the South and southern Midwest, but travels comfortably in the freight of trucks and trains, and probably can be found in all 50 States. They don't mind the company of humans, and set up housekeeping underneath furniture, within hanging curtains, and in the shadowed corners of closets. In the wild lands they hide the daylight hours away beneath rocks, dead logs, and pieces of bark in forests all over America. They attack more readily in the warmer months, usually at night and only when disturbed. Curious children are their most frequent victims.

Like most spiders, their bite is often painless. Having relatively dull fangs, the serious wounds they inflict are usually on tender areas of the human anatomy. Within one to five hours, a painful red blister appears where the fangs did their damage. Watch for the development of a bluish circle around the blister, and a red, irritated circle beyond that: The characteristic "bull's-eye" lesion of the recluse. The victim may suffer chills, fever, a generalized weakness, and a diffuse rash.

Sometimes the lesion resolves harmlessly over the next week or two. Sometimes it spreads irregularly as an enzyme in the spider's venom destroys the cells of the victim's skin and subcutaneous fat. This ulcerous tissue heals slowly and leaves a lasting scar. In a few children, death has occurred from severe complications in their circulatory system.

Without the spider as evidence, it is difficult to be sure what is causing the problem. Initially, there is little to be done other than calming the victim, and applying cold to the site of the bite for reduction of pain. Any "volcanic" skin ulcers should be seen by a physician as soon as possible. Antibiotic therapy usually cures the patient.

By looking before poking your hands into dark places, you can avoid almost all contact with dangerous spiders. Set camp and gather firewood while there's still plenty of light. If you must move around the dark, wear boots and use a flashlight. Take a look in your boots before stuffing in your feet in the morning.

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