

BITES - SPIDERS & SNAKES

SPIDER BITES

Three medically important spiders are the black widow (button), the brown recluse (violin) and the sac spider.

The black widow or button spider

- The poisonous female black widow is long-legged and glossy black, with a distinctive orange, red, or yellow hourglass shape on her underside.
- These spiders are active at night. They prefer dark corners or crevices, like garages, barbecue grills, around swimming pools and in wood piles. Only the females bite humans and only when they are disturbed.
- Black widow spider bites may cause sharp, shooting pains up the limb, but they can also be painless. Look for one or two red fang marks, redness, tenderness and a nodule at the bite site. The bite of a black widow spider, due to the neurotoxic venom, causes serious symptoms. The bite can cause pain, cramps and severe anxiety.
- In some cases, severe symptoms appear within 30 to 60 minutes. These include:
 - Muscle cramps and spasms that start near the bite and then spread and increase in severity for 6 to 12 hours
 - Chills, fever, nausea, or vomiting
 - Sweating
 - Severe belly, back, or chest pain
 - Headache
 - Stupor, restlessness, or shock
 - Severe high blood pressure.



The brown recluse (violin) spider

- Violin spiders usually live in grasslands and in caves with only one species found in houses. Violin spiders are nocturnal and at night may find their way into e.g. clothing, beds and shoes. To date no anti-venom has been produced, and although death seldom occur, plastic surgery is sometimes necessary to repair tissue damage.
- Violin spiders are usually brown or reddish brown in colour, with dark markings on their bodies. These spiders usually have markings on the thorax, with a black line coming from the thorax that looks like a violin with the neck of the violin pointing to the rear of the spider, resulting in the nicknames fiddleback spider or violin spider.

- They are often confused with daddy-long-legs, which are not venomous.
- The superficial bite of the violin spider is painless and initially goes unnoticed. About two hours after the bite, a red swollen lesion, sometimes with a purple centre develops.
- Over the next day or two bleeding into the site causes a blackened lesion. By day four the swelling and inflammation subside, while cutaneous necrosis (cell death) continues to spread slowly.
- Necrotic tissue sloughs off leaving a deep ulcerating wound, which is slow to heal and leaves an ugly scar.



The sac spider

Sac spiders are commonly found outdoors and only one of the species is regularly found in houses. They may hide in folds of curtains, bedding and clothing on a clothesline in a soft silk sac-like retreat.

Sac spiders are readily recognised by their pale colour (fawn, yellow to yellowish green). A prominent feature is the arrangement of the legs - two pairs directed forwards and two pairs backwards with the first pair being much longer than the others. The tips of the legs and the mouth-parts are usually darkly coloured.

- The bite of the sac spider is painless and the person is usually not aware that the bite occurred. Sometimes two fang bite marks (4-8 mm) apart are visible.
- A typical bull's eye lesion may form when the surrounding area gradually becomes red, swollen and painful. The centre of the wound undergoes necrotic changes, leaving an ulcerating wound.
- The severity of the lesion is variable and local tissue damage and necrosis may be minimal or extensive.
- Systemic symptoms like tender lymph nodes, a rash, low-grade fever, headache, muscle and joint pain may occasionally develop.



HOW TO TREAT A SPIDER BITE

Black widow or button spider

Get medical help immediately.

- Call your doctor, hospital, or poison control centre.
- Remain calm. Too much excitement or movement will increase the flow of venom into the blood.
- Apply ice to the bite area.
- Do not apply a tourniquet. It may cause more harm than good.
- Try to positively identify the spider or catch it to confirm its type.
- An anti-venom is available and will be given to the patient at the hospital.

The violin spider and the sac spider

- Treatment should focus on preventing and treating secondary infection using local antiseptics and systemic antibiotics to promote healing.
- Ulcers are managed conservatively through cleaning and dressing. Timely surgical cleaning may stop a rapidly spreading lesion.
- Disfiguring scars may require reconstructive surgery.
- The patient should receive a tetanus toxoid booster.

The sac spider

- The majority of the bites are self-limiting and heals spontaneously. Treatment of the bites should be to prevent and treat secondary infection using local antiseptics and systemic antibiotics.
- Occasionally, an infected wound may develop into a rapidly spreading cellulitis (inflammation of the skin and surrounding tissue), which requires aggressive antibiotic therapy. The patient should receive a tetanus toxoid booster.

Treatment of spider bites irrespective of the kind of spider:

- Wash the area of the bite with soap and water.
- Apply a cold pack or cloth filled with ice to the site.
- Paracetamol can be given for pain.
- To protect against infection, apply an antibiotic ointment.



SNAKE BITES

- There are many different kinds of snakes and not all of them are poisonous. The information provided in this article is not specific to a particular kind of snake bite. Whenever a person gets bitten by a snake, the best thing to do is to try to take a picture of the snake, so that the healthcare provider will know exactly which anti-venom to give or what treatment to provide.
- Always reassure the victim to prevent panic.
- Keep the limb and the patient still until help arrives.
- If possible apply a firm crepe bandage to the limb. Make sure the bite site is bandaged.
- Immobilise the limb further by applying a splint. If the trunk of the victim is bitten (rare), apply firm pressure without restricting breathing.
- Get medical help immediately or take the victim to hospital.

CONCLUSION

We share the earth with animals, reptiles and insects and from time to time we invade each other's space which often lead to bites.

By following the steps above, it might limit the damage these bites can do to the body.

Preventing bites are always the safer option.

Any severe symptoms should be referred to a healthcare provider immediately.



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