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Brown recluse spiders more visible in fall

Venom is not toxic for most, but can be deadly

By Claudia Pinto • THE TENNESSEAN • October 12, 2010

Of all the creepy-crawlies we live with in Middle Tennessee, none, perhaps, creeps us out more than the brown recluse spider. Just about all of us know somebody who knows somebody who was bitten by one, or we've seen distressingly disgusting online pictures of necrotized flesh eaten away by brown recluse venom.

The good news is that the spiders aren't nearly as dangerous as we have been led to believe. The bad news is that they're a lot more common than most people realize, and this time of year you're more likely to spot them in [your home](#).

Brown recluses tend to hide in dark, out-of-the-way places, so they often go unseen. But as outdoor temperatures drop, the spiders seek shelter.

"When it gets too cold, they move inside," said David Cook, an agricultural agent with the University of Tennessee Extension Office Davidson County. "There's a consistent temperature inside the home. What's comfortable for us is also comfortable for them."

Dr. Saralyn Williams, a medical toxicologist with the Tennessee Poison Center, said that the vast majority of people have nothing to fear from brown recluses. About 90 percent of people who are bitten by one don't have any significant reaction. They might experience some itching, redness and a small scab at the site, she said.

Cook, for example, was bitten on his arm, and his reaction was no worse than a bee sting. "I noticed a slight itchy sensation. My arm felt warm. That was about it."

It's what happens to the unlucky 10 percent that gives rise to the horror [stories](#).

Bites can be serious

Ronald Wilson, 48, of Nashville, was one of the unlucky ones.

Wilson awoke one morning last year to find that the [skin](#) on the back of his right calf had turned black, and his leg swelled to three times its normal size. (Venom from the spider can cause skin tissue to decay and die.)

Wilson's father took him to Skyline Medical Center, where he spent nearly 50 days in a medically induced coma. When he woke up, one-third of the flesh from his right calf — about the size of a hoagie sandwich — was gone.

"I saw everything. I saw the damage," Wilson said. "I was almost in disbelief. I was thinking, 'That's my leg?' The pain hit me and I started screaming. That's when I passed out."

Williams said doctors do not fully understand why reactions to brown recluse venom vary so wildly from person to person, although it is known that the elderly and young children are at increased risk.

[A 3-year-old Macon County girl died](#) in September after being bitten.

Whether the bite occurs on a fatty area of the body also is a factor. "There's not as much blood flow to fatty areas," Williams said. "Without blood flow, the body may not be able to break down the venom as well. It may stay more concentrated in that area."

What to do once bitten

Cook thinks brown recluses gets a bad rap.



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He said people are typically only bitten after they've accidentally injured the spider. Common scenarios include rolling over on one during sleep or putting on a shirt from the closet that the spider's been living in.

"They aren't seeking us out," Cook said. "Brown recluses aren't aggressive. They're really kind of a docile spider."

If you are bitten, Williams advises elevating the affected area and applying ice to reduce pain. There is no anti-venom to treat brown recluse bites, so Williams said doctors treat the wounds the same way they treat burns. In cases where large amounts of tissue have died, skin grafts can be performed for cosmetic reasons.

Wilson, for example, underwent two skin graft surgeries. In all, he was hospitalized for three and a half months. It took him nearly eight months to learn to walk again, and he was unable to work for a full year.

Wilson, therefore, disagrees with Cook about the spider getting a bad rap.

"My response is, 'It's nothing personal, but kill them all,' " he said, only half-joking.

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It has three sets of eyes arranged in a semicircle, rather than eight eyes, like most spiders have.

It's also known as the fiddleback," because of a violin-shaped marking on the top of its body.

It's about the size of a quarter.

The color of a brown recluse varies from a light yellowish brown to a dark, reddish or chocolate brown, but most are light to medium brown.

In homes, they tend to prefer darkened storage areas such as closets, garages, basements, attics and cupboards.

It's a shy spider that does not attack people and usually only bites in response to being injured.

About 90 percent of people bitten by brown recluse spiders won't have a significant reaction.

Initial symptoms may include itching and redness at the site. Elevate and ice a suspected bite to reduce pain.

Source: University of Tennessee Agricultural Extension Service, Tennessee Poison Center



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