

Features

Office of Medical Information
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**** Fall is spider season,
UT Southwestern experts warn

DALLAS -- The itchy-bitsy spider climbs up the water spout ... or so the nursery rhyme goes. Unfortunately, spiders don't confine themselves to water spouts. And the venom of some is more toxic in the fall. You are likely to encounter them all around your house, and experts say you should exercise special caution when unpacking your fall and winter clothes from the attic or storage closet.

In the United States, at least 60 species of spiders have been implicated in spider bites, but the black widow and brown recluse are the most dangerous. Both prefer dry, dark, undisturbed locations, which include garages, closets, and trunks or boxes full of clothes and linens, says Dr. Clay Cockerell, assistant professor of dermatopathology at The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas.

Spider venoms contain a number of toxins, which can have a variety of effects on the victim, from mild nausea and headaches to massive skin erosion, cardiac problems and central-nervous-system disruption. Death is rare but can occur in children and the elderly or in people with other underlying health problems, said Cockerell.

Of dangerous spiders the adult female black widow is responsible for most bites. It is approximately 1 1/2 inches long

(More)

with its legs extended, glossy black with a red or orange hour-glass marking on the bottom side of its abdomen. The black widow is found in every U.S. state except Alaska. Most bites occur when the spider or its web is disturbed.

A female black widow bite may feel like a sharp pinprick, followed by a dull, sometimes numbing, pain in the affected extremity accompanied by muscular rigidity. This is sometimes followed by extreme radiating pain, muscle cramps, abdominal pains, tightness in the chest, restlessness, sweating, headaches, nausea, vomiting, swollen eyelids, respiratory distress and a general feeling of weakness.

The brown recluse is a brown spider that grows to about the size of a half-dollar, including the legs. It can be identified by the fiddle-shaped marking on its back. It resides primarily in southern, western and midwestern states. It is a peaceful spider that usually only bites when disturbed.

A brown recluse bite may cause little or no pain initially, but some localized pain develops within an hour or so. The area around the bite may become swollen and turn purple, eventually bursting and leaving a gaping hole in the skin. The skin around the bite area may continue to erode for several days. In some cases the wound may take months to heal. Other symptoms include kidney problems, fever, chills and vomiting. Luckily, in most cases the bites heal uneventfully, according to Cockerell.

You're not as likely to encounter this terrible twosome as you are the American house spider, wolf spider, jumping spider, spitting spider and grass spider. All are capable of biting but are relatively

harmless although bites can cause tiny skin ulcers. These common spiders won't usually bite unless you sit on one or put your foot in the shoe it is hiding in.

What can you do about spiders? A broad spectrum insecticide will kill them. It's best to spray the spider, but if you can't, spray the area where you frequently see spiders. However, spiders do a good job of controlling the roach and cricket population, so you might be exchanging one problem for another.

To prevent being bitten by a spider, Dr. Cockerell suggests exercising caution when putting on shoes, boots or garments that have been in storage. He also suggests cleaning out boxes and closets frequently. And when you're doing yardwork or cleaning out the garage this fall, wear gloves.

If you are bitten anyway, an ice cube on a spider bite can reduce the pain. Flea, tick, bedbug and mite bites often are mistaken for spider bites since they can cause some of the same skin reactions.

If you think you've been bitten by a spider, seek medical attention, and if possible, bring the spider in for identification, even if it has been crushed.

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NOTE: The University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center at Dallas comprises Southwestern Medical School, Southwestern Graduate School of Biomedical Sciences, Southwestern Allied Health Sciences School, affiliated teaching hospitals and outpatient clinics.

PHOTOS OF SPIDERS AVAILABLE