
BLACK WIDOW SPIDER

Spiders are the creepy crawly killers we fear, nestling under our bed sheets, or lurking in our shoes or just out of sight in some corner of the cabinet. When it comes to the black widow spider, this fear is well founded, because an excitable black widow can easily make your spouse a widow, or widower.

HOW IT KILLS

The black widow spider may be the most recognized bug in the world (spiders are not insects). Its bulbous black body and red hour-glass tattoo are as just likely to cause you to break out in a sweat as the sight of a great white fin slicing through the water. It's a universal sign for "stay away or die."

Black widows stake out dark quiet places to spin their webs, which are among the strongest created by any spider. It waits patiently for an unsuspecting visitor, such as your hand or your foot, and sinks its tiny fangs into the flesh. The fangs, technically referred to as chelicerae, are less than a millimeter long, but they are sharp enough to deliver some of the most neurotoxic venom in the world right into your bloodstream.



This venom, called alpha-latrotoxin, is gram for gram a dozen times more potent than that unleashed by rattlesnakes. It is a complex toxin that affects control of the cardiovascular and muscular system.

You may feel an abrupt stabbing pain when you are bitten. Pains spreads quickly from the bite wound to your midsection, especially around your stomach and back. Cramps and stiffness will follow, along with nausea, increased blood pressure, and labored breathing. Next up is vomiting, irregular heartbeat, convulsions, general irritations and even priapism (unnatural stiffening of the penis . . . if you're a male). Facial muscle spasms, anxiety, pale skin, and an inability to stay still will be followed by a substantial increase in mucous and sputum. Liquid buildup in the lungs, known as noncardiac pulmonary edema, will keep oxygen from getting to your other organs. That means the end of the road, as no oxygen equals no life.

KNOWN BY SCIENCE AS:

The southern black widow (*L. mactans*), the northern black widow (*L. variolus*), and the western black widow (*L. hesperus*), all of which are found in North America. Latrodectism is the medical term for what happens to you after you're bitten.

MEDICAL CAUSE OF DEATH

Hypoxia; possibly cardiac failure

TIME TO KILL

The first signs of trouble occur within twenty to thirty minutes after envenomation. Death can occur after five days if no antivenin is taken.

HIGHEST RISK

People who stick their fingers where they don't belong; landscapers; construction crews in the Southwest; infants; the elderly

LETHALITY 

Low, less than 5 percent. Black widows do not usually inject enough venom to kill a healthy adult. Antivenin supplies are prevalent, further minimizing the actual death toll.

KILLS PER ANNUM



Three to six

HISTORIC DEATH TOLL

The only significant study of black-widow-spider deaths, conducted in 1963, showed that sixty-three people died over a ten-year period between 1950 and 1959. Many physicians are unable to detect the cause of death from a black widow.

NOTABLE VICTIMS

In the summer of 2006, a seventeen-year-old boy and a twenty-seven-year-old woman were killed by black widows in the same week. Making it stranger still is they lived in Albania, and the black widows were believed to have come into the country aboard transport ships.

HORROR FACTOR: 1 

It is just a bug bite, after all.

GRIM FACTS

- Prior to the widespread use of indoor plumbing, a significant number of black-widow bites were delivered to the genitals and buttocks due to the spiders nesting in outhouses.

- Members of the “widow” family of spiders are found all over the world and are believed to account for the majority of fatal spider bites.
- Throughout the twentieth century, black widow thread was highly prized for use as the crosshairs in scientific instruments and sniper scopes.