

Brown recluse spider: Fact vs. fiction and tips for prevention

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Any spider can disturb a quiet night or a daytime chore around the house.

But the words "brown recluse [spider](#)" can elicit an even higher level of anxiety and even fear.

Wizzie Brown, Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service integrated pest management specialist for Travis County, said many concerns about the brown recluse spider have been mythologized, but there are ways to prevent bites and reduce their numbers. Brown is a member of the team of IPM specialists within the AgriLife Extension arm of the Department of Entomology in the Texas A&M College of Agriculture and Life Sciences.

The brown recluse spider can be found inside and outside throughout Texas. They are active from spring through the fall outside but can be active year-round in climate-controlled spaces like homes.

The spider has two body regions that are smooth-looking, eight slender legs and typically a light tan to dark, grayish brown color that is uniform, Brown said. Adults are about the size of a quarter to half dollar—legs and all—and have three pairs of eyes on their cephalothorax, the front body section.

Many descriptions found online also include mention of the violin-shaped marking on the back, but Brown said those markings are sometimes faint and can be similar to other non-venomous spiders. The size, color and eye-pattern are the best indicators.

Their webs are not distinct either and typically sparse with a lack of any pattern, she said.

"I hear all the time that they are a lot smaller than people think they are," she said. "But the eye pattern is pretty distinctive. Only one other spider group in Texas has that eye pattern, and they are not venomous."

Brown recluse spiders hide in undisturbed places

They are nocturnal hunters and prefer hidden areas that are rarely disturbed, Brown said. Stacks of firewood outside or stored boxes in basements and attics are good examples of places a brown recluse spider might hide, but any crack or crevice in low-traffic areas can shelter them.

"They really are shy, thus the name recluse," she said. "They come out to hunt insects, even other spiders, at night, but otherwise they like hidden areas where they aren't bothered."

Bites are typically "accidents," Brown said. Reaching into a wood pile or putting on clothes that have been stored in a closet for extended periods could lead to a defensive [bite](#) from a brown recluse.

Brown recommends wearing leather gloves when working outside, cleaning out sheds or moving items in an attic or basement. The gloves will protect from a variety of potential issues such as bites from spiders or stings from scorpions.

To avoid hiding spiders, seasonal clothes that have been in storage or in a closet for a while should be shaken out well or put in a dryer on high heat for about 45 minutes before they are worn. Brown also recommends checking shoes that have been sitting in a closet.

"Summer clothes coming out of winter or vice versa, linens, shoes should all be shaken out," she said. "A house can offer the perfect habitat for the brown recluse, so you should take steps on the front end to avoid a potential problem with anything that might be in there."

A tip for campers and hikers is to check under the seat when using a primitive bathroom, Brown said.

Brown recluse spider bites rarely as bad as internet searches suggest

A brown recluse spider surprise in a shoe or under a toilet seat is nightmare fuel for most, but Brown said bites are rarely as serious as some stories or images portray on the internet. There has never been a confirmed death attributed to the brown recluse spider. And while bites may swell and can break down cellular tissue in the bite area, they are typically akin to any normal wound.

Brown said bites should be cleaned and dressed with a topical antibiotic and monitored. Medical attention should be sought for any serious reaction to a bite or wound that is not healing properly.

"There are other things like antibiotic-resistant staph infections that look similar to spider bites, but that can be far more gruesome than a bite," she said. "Some photos presented as [brown recluse spider](#) bites are horrible, but anyone can put information and photos on the internet. Unless the person has an allergic reaction to the venom or has some secondary issue that might compound the bite, there is usually not much to worry about."

Prevention over panic

An encounter with a brown recluse or any spider can be unsettling, but Brown said there is no need to panic.

"If you see one in the house, you can suck them up with a vacuum or squish them with a shoe," she said.

Brown said sticky traps placed along a wall will passively capture them. Spiders and other insects typically follow edges because it is safer.

Residual pesticides can be used to kill spiders and other [insect pests](#), Brown said. Sprays should be concentrated around corners, cracks and crevices. Dust pesticides can also be used but should be applied to areas where the dust can settle and not be disturbed like under the sink or behind large appliances like washing machines. When using pesticides, Brown said be sure to read and follow label directions.

Checking seals around doors and windows and locations insects might gain entry is a good way to prevent spiders and other pests from getting in a home.

"If there is a recurring problem with brown recluse spiders in a location, I could see the need for action," she said. "But I know of a house that has regular pest control and would catch hundreds of them, but no one had ever been bitten. They want to avoid an encounter with us as much as we want to avoid an encounter with them."

Provided by Texas A&M University

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