

Workplace Health and Safety Queensland

Information guide – Rural industry

23. Spiders, scorpions and centipedes

The following is information on some of Queensland's most distinctive spiders.

Funnel-webs

Potentially these are the most dangerous spiders in the world. In Queensland, funnel-webs tend to be more common in moist, cool rainforests and can be found as far north as Gladstone, west to Toowoomba and in the Brisbane area around the base of Mt Coottha, the Daisy Hill Forest Park and adjacent parts of Springwood. Recently they have been found in remote mountain rainforests west of Mossman, North Queensland.

Distinguishing features include shiny black head, closely grouped eyes, moderately long legs, black or dark plum body. The head or body of a female funnel-web can cover a 50-cent coin; the legs easily span the width of an adult hand.

Both males and females are very aggressive and bites from either sex are potentially dangerous, even fatal. The bite may cause severe pain, followed by numbness of the affected area, vomiting, sweating and muscular cramp.

First aid

First aid for funnel-web bites:

- Keep the patient calm and still.
- Immediately apply a pressure immobilisation bandage. (See fact sheet '22. Snakes' for details of this technique.)
- Keep the patient as still as possible and bring transport to them.
- Seek medical help as soon as possible.

Whistling spiders

This is another type of trapdoor spider and makes an audible hissing sound when disturbed. It is found in the north and west of Queensland. Whistling spiders are very large, with legs spanning around 12cm.

Although not usually aggressive, if provoked, it will rear up and appear menacing. The bite is painful and may cause severe nausea and vomiting for six to eight hours. Dogs quickly succumb to their bite.

Mouse spiders

These are common in suburban gardens, native bushland and some rainforests throughout Australia. These are often confused with funnel-webs. The venom is believed to be as dangerous and dry bites are common. Spiders vary in size from a 5-20-cent coin in leg span. From underneath, the fangs of the mouse spider cross at the tips, whereas in the funnel-web and all other trapdoor spiders, the fangs lie parallel when closed.

Golden trapdoor spiders

These are found throughout Queensland and most evident near tracks in national parks throughout the south-east. They are trapdoor spiders which put a 'door' (a thick plug of soil and web) on their burrows. Their head is golden brown and glossy. No bites have been recorded.

Redback spiders

The adult female usually has a black body and legs, a distinct red mark on the upperside and a red hourglass on the underside. Males and young redbacks are a dirty white colour with six black spots on the top of the abdomen and a white hourglass underneath. Males are much smaller than females and rarely seen.

Redbacks seem completely indiscriminate in their choice of site for their web and build almost anywhere that can provide a reasonable amount of food. Around houses, webs may be found under window sills, guttering and eaves, in the corner of windows and doors, under steps and verandas, around pot plants and in crevices of bricks.

Redbacks are difficult to control or eradicate from an area because they are hardy animals that breed in large amounts, live in hidden places and disperse easily. The female is able to store the sperm of a male and use it over a period of two years to lay several batches of eggs. Redbacks normally lay between 40-300 eggs in a sac and usually make 3-5 sacs at a time.

Both males and females can bite, but female bites are more common. The initial bite is often felt but may be painless, although some victims have reported burning sensations. Puncture marks are not always evident. In most bites, intense local pain is experienced about five minutes afterwards. The main symptom of a redback bite is local sweating at the bite site.

Spraying with insecticide is often necessary but of limited control value. The most effective method is to take a stick, push it quickly into the web as far as it will go and roll the spider, its eggs and web onto the stick. Then remove and crush the spider and its eggs.

First aid for redback and other spider bites:

- Reassure the patient that their life is not at major risk.
- Apply an antiseptic, then ice pack to the site.
- Seek medical advice and bring the spider with the patient if possible.
- Do not use a pressure immobilisation bandage.

Huntsmen

Brown huntsmen are common inside houses and sheds and are often killed without thought. During the day they hide under bark and at night they hunt over tree trunks and the ground. Many young may be found in bathrooms, where they emerge from an egg sac attached inside the pipes.

If handled, they may bite but prefer to retreat. The bite is painful but seldom produces more than a mild headache, local pain or swelling.

Wolf spiders

These vary in size from a one-cent coin to almost the width of an average adult hand. Typically they are drab-coloured with dark brown or black heads marked with lighter radial markings which may resemble a Union Jack pattern. From the front, two large and two smaller pairs of shiny black eyes are evident and the two large fang-bearing bumps have a small, distinct orange patch on the side. Wolf spiders are ground hunters, often disturbed in gardens where they build burrows in the soil or live among fallen leaves.

If mishandled, they may bite. Some symptoms of wolf spider bites include rapid pulse, dizziness, nausea, swelling, persistent pain and tingling. However, most bites produce no reaction.

Scorpions and centipedes

Large brown scorpions are common in gardens and forests throughout eastern Queensland and found under logs, rocks and in shallow burrows in earth banks. The sting, delivered by the tail, is not known to be dangerous and the scorpion usually retreats rather than fights. Common garden centipedes may reach 15cm and are found throughout northern Australia. They live in logs and spaces formed between rubbish and even newspapers. They move rapidly and bite with two powerful 'jaws' below the head.

The bite causes severe pain which may last several days, but no deaths have been recorded from the bite.

Large golden scorpions are one of the biggest scorpions in Queensland and are common on and west of the Great Dividing Range. No dangerous reaction to its sting has been recorded.

Reducing the risks

Here are some tips to avoid being bitten:

- Do not put your hands, feet or head into or near a spider's web. A spider may drop or rush out and bite you. Do not put your hands, feet or head into somewhere you cannot see, especially gloves, helmets or boots.
- Clothes left on the line overnight should be folded inside out before taking inside.
- Do not provoke, poke or blow on spiders. They will jump and bite.
- Do not crush anything you may feel walking on you. Get somebody to knock it off you. Spider juices are often toxic or bacterially dangerous.
- Strip beds and remake them before going to sleep. Ensure bed clothing of babies or infants does not touch floors.

More information

Further information is available from www.worksafe.qld.gov.au or by calling the WHS Infoline on 1300 369 915.

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