

Spider Bites

Barbara Brillhart RN PhD FNP-BC



Black Widow



Brown Recluse

Common situations people may encounter while rock hunting and gathering in the desert include spider bites. This article will briefly detail the symptoms and treatments for the Black Widow Spider and the Brown Recluse Spider bites. Tips for prevention of spider bites will conclude the article.

Black Widow spiders appear as black or brown spiders with a shiny, round abdomen. The females are about ½” long and 1 ½” wide including the legs, males are about half the size of the females. The female spider has a red hour glass marking on the underside of the abdomen. Some types of Black Widow spiders have a series of red spots and two cross bars as markings on the underside of the abdomen. These spiders are common in the desert Southwest. The make webs under ledges, rocks, plants, and debris.

If bitten by this spider, the person will experience a pinprick sensation, local pain, swelling and redness at the bite site, abdominal pain, and muscle cramps. The person may be able to see two fang marks. Other symptoms of the spider bite are headache, rash, itching, swelling the eyelids, tearing, weakness, tremors, nausea, vomiting, dizziness, chest pain, problems breathing, and high blood pressure. The immediate treatment for this type of spider bite includes: an ice pack to the bite site, elevation of arm or leg with the bite, then transport to the nearest emergency room. If possible, place the spider in a plastic bag or other container and take to the ER. The health care personnel will be able to treat the person medically for muscle cramping with medications, monitor the person’s heart and respiratory function, treat symptoms, and give the person anti-venom.

The Brown Recluse Spider has a violin-shaped marking on the body of the spider. The spiders can be yellow-tan to dark brown in color. They are about the size of a quarter. The color of the Brown Recluse Spider more common in Arizona is the non-brown variety. They live in warm, dry areas as wood piles, old tires, crevices, and under rocks.

If bitten by this spider, the person will experience mild burning and irritation, pain, swelling, and itching at the bite site. A blister will form with red skin around it at the bite site. Then an ulcer with red-purple discoloration may appear at the site at the site within eight hours. Serious lesions with a center of necrosis (dead tissue) over a 1/2" across can develop and could take months to heal. Other symptoms of the spider bite include fever, chills, vomiting, joint pain, dark colored urine, joint pain, rashes, and increased clotting time of the blood. Brown Recluse Spider bites are considered very serious.

An ice pack should be applied to the bite area and the bitten area elevated. The person should be taken to the nearest emergency room. If possible, again place the spider in a container and take to the ER. Health care personnel will start intravenous fluids and give medications as antihistamines, steroids, antibiotics, adrenaline, and anti-venom.

Tips for preventing spider bites are (1) wear boots while rock hunting, (2) wear long sleeved shirts- place rubber bands at cuffs, (3) wear long pants- either tuck pant legs inside boots with laces or tie off pant legs with string at cuff level if pant legs are on outside of boot, (4) use gloves, (5) carry a walking staff to be used to move rocks or plants, clear spider webs, and turn over rocks. The most important tip is to be aware of your surroundings and know spiders inhabit dark, enclosed areas.