

# Black Widow Spider



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In the United States, only about a dozen species of spiders are harmful to humans. Nevertheless, they are among our most maligned creatures, the subject of both nursery rhyme and horror film. Spiders come in second only to snakes in the most-feared-creature contest. And of all spiders, the notorious “black widow” is perhaps the most feared.

## Identification

The female black widow, *Latrodectus mactans*, is a glossy, black spider about 3/8-inch to 1/2-inch long, with a spherical abdomen. You can identify her by the two distinctive red spots in an hourglass shape on her abdomen. Her web is an irregular, tangled mass with a silken retreat in which she hides.

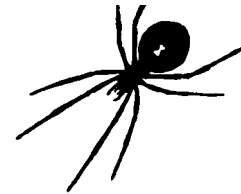
*Young black widow spiders are often dispersed by the wind, a phenomenon known as “ballooning.”*

The egg sac of the black widow is a gray silk ball, about 1/2-inch in diameter. Newly hatched spiderlings are brown with striped legs and bodies.

The male black widow is about half as large as the female, with a more oval-shaped abdomen, longer legs, and a striped or spotted color pattern. Since the poison glands of the male are not functional in the adult stage, he is harmless.

## Biology and Habits

The webs of the black widow are usually found outdoors close to the ground under structures such as porches, barns, garages, woodpiles, or trash heaps. Webs are also sometimes found in meter boxes or indoors in dark, undisturbed corners. The female of this species has gained a reputation for eating the male after mating, hence her grisly name. However, scientists now believe that this practice is the exception rather than the rule.



You usually will find the adult female black widow hanging upside down in her web, guarding her egg sac and avoiding daylight. The eggs hatch in about one month. The life cycle from egg to adult requires four months. In one season, female black widows can produce from four to nine egg sacs, each containing about 250 eggs.

*Most bites occur when a female is accidentally disturbed while guarding her egg sac.*

Young black widow spiders often are dispersed by the wind, a phenomenon known as “ballooning.” When this occurs, the spiderlings climb atop vegetation or other

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objects, spin webs, and allow the air currents to carry them aloft like kites. This can account for the occasional occurrence of large numbers of black widows in a single location--outbreaks said to be due to weather conditions.

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Most bites occur when a female is accidentally disturbed while guarding her egg sac. If you are bitten, see a physician at once. The bite of the black widow can cause localized pain, followed by severe abdominal muscle spasm.

If you examine the bite closely, you can distinguish it from an insect bite or sting. The spider's fangs leave **two** small puncture marks in the skin rather than just one.

If you know you have been bitten, try to collect the responsible spider and take the specimen with you when you go to see your physician. Treatment for spider bites varies with the type of spider. Antivenin is available to counteract the black widow's poison.

### **Prevention Methods**

As a general rule, the more cluttered an area, the more the black widow spider will like

it. Therefore, preventing infestations in and around your house should begin with an inspection to locate spots where clutter can be eliminated. Pay particular attention to seldom-used sections of basements and garages. You may wish to wear gloves while working, just in case you do find a spider.

In addition to reducing clutter, prevention strategies should include regular dusting and vacuuming to remove webs and egg sacs. One indirect way to control spiders indoors is by keeping out the insects they feed on. Use screens to cover windows, doors, and the vents under roof eaves. Caulk around window casings and around the openings where pipes, cables, and wires enter walls.

### **Control Strategies**

If you find a black widow spider in or near your house, destroy her and her egg sac manually with a fly swatter or other long-handled tool. Since spiders usually rest in their webs and do not contact surfaces, insecticide sprays are not always effective unless you spray them directly on the spider.

A pyrethrin aerosol will provide quick knockdown. For a persistent black widow problem in attics or outbuildings, a dust insecticide applied lightly to webs should provide long-term control.

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