Brown Recluse Spiders in Nebraska

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There are 13 species of “brown” spiders in the U.S. The brown recluse spider, *Loxosceles reclusa*, is the most widespread spider in the United States. Nebraska is on the northern-most edge of the range of this spider, but we have had more clients bringing brown recluse spiders to the UNL Extension in Lancaster County office in the last few years.

Because of the locations where brown recluse spiders have been found in the Lincoln/Lancaster County area, we believe that most of the brown recluse spider infestations get started when people move infested items in boxes or shipping containers into non-infested places. The majority of these infestations are in structures where goods are shipped to, like commercial businesses, warehouses or storage facilities. Several apartment buildings in Lincoln have been seriously infested with brown recluse spiders. In these cases, it is likely (past or present) tenants may have inadvertently caused an infestation by moving infested boxes with them — especially if they moved from an infested apartment or from southern states where brown recluse spiders are more common. We’ve rarely heard about homeowners who found a brown recluse spider in their home.

Brown recluse spiders are medium-sized spiders and are tannish brown to dark brown in color. Recluse spiders have a fiddle-shaped mark on their cephalothorax, although it may be faded or missing in juvenile spiders. Their legs are long and thin compared with many spiders. The key feature that distinguishes them from all other spiders is that they have six eyes, arranged in pairs. A microscope or magnifying glass is needed to see this level of detail.

Recluse spiders are nocturnal hunters of insects and other spiders. The brown recluse naturally lives in outdoor situations, living in piles of debris, wood piles, under bark, logs and stones. But, in Nebraska, the brown recluse spider isn’t found living outdoors as it does in more southern states, although it has been found in unheated warehouses. Indoors, they usually hide in undisturbed areas like closets, attics, crawlspace, basements and cellars. They can travel on walls, in “dropped” ceilings, or inside walls along ductwork and plumbing. These spiders crawl into clothing, boxes, papers and often prefer “layered” situations, like stacks of papers or clothes.

Continued on next page
People get bitten when they dress and inadvertently “trap” the spider between the article of clothing and their skin. They may also get bitten if the spider is trapped in bed linens or when people are cleaning infested areas. These spiders are very shy and do not bite unless trapped or threatened. They do not attack people.

The bite may not be noticed when it occurs. Typically, the lesion begins 4–6 hours after the bite and expands outward. It may become necrotic and ulcerous and can take months to heal without medical intervention. Plastic surgery, skin grafts may be necessary to repair the skin. Other symptoms are: fever, nausea, vomiting, headache, rashes. Brown recluse spider bites are rarely fatal.

It is impossible to identify a spider from a spider bite, but bites which become ulcerous are usually (and sometimes mistakenly) attributed to the brown recluse spider. There are other spiders whose bites may become inflamed and, very rarely, ulcerous. Persons bitten by a spider should make an effort to collect the spider and take it to the doctor or clinic for identification. Positive identification can be helpful in determining the type of medical care needed. In the case of the brown recluse, prompt medical attention may be needed to prevent a serious reaction.

There are some other medical conditions that can cause a wound or sore to not heal properly. Resistant staph infections (aka, MRSA: Methicillin Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus) have increased in recent years and are serious enough they should be treated by a physician. Resistant staph infections of the skin look quite similar to the bite response to a brown recluse spider. It is important to see a physician anytime there is a wound or sore which doesn’t seem to heal properly.

Controlling brown recluse infestations is difficult because of the reclusive nature of these spiders. Control tactics may make the spiders more in the open which may bring them into increased contact with persons living or working in the building. Control tactics include vacuuming and cleaning infested areas. Dust insecticides are often used in cracks, crevices and void areas. The generous use of sticky traps will help catch and remove spiders as they become more active responding to treatments.

We recommend working with an experienced pest control professional because of the difficulty in controlling this serious pest problem.

Brown recluse spiders are not found outdoors in Nebraska, but take these measures to prevent other spiders from coming indoors:

• Install tight-fitting screens on windows and doors; also install weather-stripping and door sweeps
• Seal or caulk cracks and crevices where spiders can gain entry to the house
• Equip vents in soffits, foundations and roof gables with tight-fitting screens
• Reduce outdoor lighting
• Install yellow or sodium vapor light bulbs outdoors less attractive to insects
• Remove wood piles, rock piles, heavy vegetation, mulch leaves and other debris near the foundation that provide harborage for insects and spiders
• Eliminate household pests that serve as food for spiders
• Trim branches of trees and shrubs so that they do not touch the house.