

Brown Widow Spider

Status

- Venomous bite
- Possible health threat

General Information

The **brown widow spider** (*Latrodectus geometricus*) is probably native to Africa; it is now found in many places around the world. In 2003, it was found in Torrance, California, and soon became common in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties. It can live for 1 to 2 years and can reproduce rapidly, making it one of the most abundant spiders in urban southern California. It is related to the native **western black widow spider** (*Latrodectus hesperus*.) The brown widow spider is increasing its distribution in southern California and will likely move northward into central California. Brown widows have very few predators. Occasionally mud dauber and digger wasps will prey on them, but this does little to reduce their abundance or their spread in California.



Life Cycle

Spiders have three stages in their life cycle: **egg**, **spiderling**, and **adult**. After mating, the female lays about 80 eggs and surrounds them with thick silk to build an **egg sac**. A few days later, the spiderlings hatch from the eggs. They feed on insects trapped in the **web** and on each other. As spiderlings eat and mature, they outgrow their skin, grow a new skin layer, and shed the old one, a process called **molting**. Spiders molt throughout their lives. Spiders can reproduce once they reach adult size. Female brown widows reproduce continuously and can make about 20 egg sacs over her lifetime. The web often has several eggs sacs of different ages, developing at the same time. The egg sac of the brown widow has spiny protrusions, compared to the smooth egg sac of the black widow.



Health Risks

Brown widow bites have a milder effect than black widows, possibly because the brown widow does not have or cannot inject as much venom as its larger relative. Symptoms of a brown widow bite are similar to most spider bites: pain at the bite site and a red mark. Although its venom is as potent as black widow venom, the brown widow probably doesn't inject very much venom, making it much less dangerous. Brown widows are shy and tend to avoid contact with humans. Females are not aggressive, make no effort to attack, and prefer to retreat or lie perfectly still. When confronted or provoked, however, they will bite. If bitten, place a cold pack on the bite to relieve the pain and seek medical attention immediately.

What Do They Look Like?

The mature female of the brown widow spider is from 1 to 1-1/2 inches long (with legs extended). Unlike its starkly black-and-red colored relative, the black widow, the coloration of a brown widow consists of a mottling of tan and brown with black accent markings. The mature female brown widow spider does have an hourglass but is typically a red-orange shade rather than the vivid red of a black widow. The brown widow looks similar to an immature western black widow spider. Males are about half the size of the female (1/2 to 3/4 inch long, with legs extended). Males do not live as long as the female, and have not been recorded to bite.



Where Do They Live?

The webs of brown and black widow spiders are made from sticky silken fibers, irregularly shaped, tangled, and constructed in hidden and protected locations. The webs can be found in dense woody plants, in empty containers, under buckets and pots, mailboxes, and under outdoor furniture. They are usually not found inside buildings. They choose more exposed sites than those chosen by black widows, which may increase their interactions with humans.

