Black Widow Spiders – Big Poison for a Tiny Bite

One of the most famous spiders is the black widow. It is mainly known for its venom. In fact, the black widow’s venom is fifteen times deadlier than the venom of the prairie rattlesnake! Fortunately, only a little venom is delivered by a black widow bite. Even this small dose can make a person sick, cause pain in the muscles, or even death by shutting down the lungs. However, a person rarely dies from a black widow bite.

Many varieties of spiders are called widow spiders. They get this name because the females sometimes kill and eat their mate. Female black widow spiders are poisonous, but males are not. Scientists have discovered that the female black widow, which is much bigger than her mate, will kill her mate only if she is hungry. That means a male black widow has to be cautious when he approaches a female for mating. Hmmm – does she look hungry or not?

After mating, a female will lay up to 1,000 eggs in an egg sac. Then she stays close to guard it. After a few days the eggs hatch, and the tiny orange, brown, and white spiderlings scamper across the silk strings of the web looking for food. Usually there is little food for the hungry spiderlings to eat, so often the bigger spiderlings eat their smaller brothers and sisters. Only about 25% of the spiderlings will survive to become adults.

Black widows are shy around people and will only bite if they feel that they or their eggs are being threatened. If bitten, a person may not feel anything for almost an hour. Then the skin around the bite becomes red and sore. The venom is a neurotoxin, which means it attacks the nervous system. Symptoms can last for three of four days. Doctors can give medications to help, including antivenin, but they need to know what kind of spider bit the patient. If a spider bites you, you should try to capture the spider for the doctor to identify. The spider doesn’t have to be alive, but it shouldn’t be squished beyond all recognition.
1. Identify whether the following are fact (f) or opinion (o).
   a. _____ Black widow spiders are the most famous spiders.
   b. _____ Black widow spider venom is deadlier than rattlesnake venom.
   c. _____ Black widow spiders are ugly.
   d. _____ Sometimes black widow spiders are cannibalistic.

2. Complete the sentences with the correct word from the list.
   a. ______________ is a poison transferred from an animal by bite or sting.
   b. To ______________ is to run nimbly.
   c. To ______________ is to remain alive.
   d. ______________ fights the effect of poison.

   - Scamper       - Antivenin
   - Venom         - Survive

3. Match the effect on the left with the cause on the right.
   A. ____ The skin becomes red and sore.  
      1. The female black widow is hungry.
   B. ____ Small spiderlings are eaten  
      2. A female black widow bites a person.
   C. ____ The doctor doesn’t know which medicine to use.  
      3. There is not enough food for the spiderlings.
   D. ____ The male black widow is eaten.  
      4. The spider that bites a person can’t be identified.

4. The story says that black widow spiders will bite people only if they feel they or their eggs are threatened. What are some things you should do or not do to avoid being bitten by black widow spiders.