

An Encounter with a Black Widow Spider

Richmond, Virginia – October 2011

Friday, October 21

(10:30 a.m.) I went to get my yard-working shoes stored in the garage with the toes up on a rack. I found a spider web on the left shoe. It was a very thick web. I figured it was a black widow or brown recluse. I removed the web with a screwdriver. I then took a long, skinny brush and ran it up both shoes in what I thought was a very thorough manner. Trash and a large, dead brown spider came out of the shoe with the spider web. I didn't check to see if the brown spider was dried up – on reflection, it might have been food for the black widow. Looking back, this was critical mistake #1.

(11:00 a.m.) About 30 minutes later I felt something sticking me under the ball of my left foot. I didn't think much about it but it persisted, so I took my shoe off and shook it. Nothing came out. I looked up into the shoe without untying the laces and put it back on – critical mistake #2. Shortly thereafter, I felt a harder stick (like that from a thorn or a small stick) near the previous one. So I took my shoe off again. This time a flattened, dead black widow spider slid out to the heel. Immediately, I realized I might be in trouble. I tried to keep the spider in the shoe as I went to tell my wife. In my excitement, I lost it. My wife took me to a nearby acute care facility immediately. I arrived within 15 to 20 minutes of the second bite. I tried to remain calm, but I could feel my heart racing.

Everyone kept asking me for the spider. I told them I had lost it but was sure it was a black widow. At the acute care facility, I was given Benadryl and two other injections, then sent to the hospital. There it was confirmed that I had been bitten twice on my left foot: just under my second toe and just under my big toe.

Symptoms:

Within about 10 minutes of the bite, pain was running up my left leg. Throughout my ordeal, it felt as if I had been violently hit with something very hard. The pain extended over the entire area. This pain never went away or throbbled – it just stayed with me. Curiously, my foot was the only part of me that swelled (near the spider bite). There was absolutely no swelling from the ankle up.

By the time I got to acute care, I was alternating between profuse sweating and chills. My skin was very clammy, and I was short of breath. I also felt pain in my groin. In the ambulance on the way to the hospital, the pain had reached from my foot to my stomach and lower back. By the time I arrived at the hospital, the pain had extended to the entire left side of my chest through to my back. It stopped just below my left arm. I thought I was going to have a heart attack. I remember thinking the pain in my groin was the worst – it felt as if I had been kicked there and it just wouldn't subside.

I was given pain medication and Valium to relax the muscles. I declined the antivenom treatment after finding out that its side effects were worse than the bite.

From the acute care visit on Friday until I left the hospital on Monday, my blood pressure ranged from a systolic reading of 180 to 200 to a diastolic reading of 120 to 130. My heart raced most of the time, most likely from the pain.

Saturday, October 22: I became nauseated and eventually was very sick. The doctors said that was most probably an effect of the toxin and the pain meds.

Sunday, October 23: The pain subsided during the morning.

Monday, October 24: The nausea subsided in the morning. I checked out of the hospital and came home with a prescription for pain meds.

Tuesday, October 25: I was very weak and rested all day. I noticed that when I tried walking, the ball of my left foot would swell and my foot and calf would hurt like fire.

Friday, October 28: I gradually gained strength and was able to do a little work. The pain had mostly subsided.

Mine was the hospital's second black widow bite admission of the week. The other patient was bitten on the arm, which swelled enormously. The patient didn't seek medical attention until two days after the bite. Their hospital stay was longer than mine – eight days! The hospital sees about four black widow bites annually.

On Reflection:

Seeking immediate attention, knowing exactly what bit me, and getting a shot of Benadryl were keys to a better outcome and weathering a most unpleasant ordeal.