

Centipedes

After reading a short article about centipede venom in the 30 January Washington Post Health and Science section, I wondered how toxic Virginia centipedes are. There are some 3,150 types of centipedes, but only three are found in Virginia.

Bark Centipede (*Scolopocryptops sexspinosus*)

Agile and fast-moving, the bark centipede is normally found outside though they may occasionally be found in the basements or outbuildings. It is red, yellow, or orange and 1 to 2 inches long.

They are capable of biting humans and may do so if disturbed, injured, or threatened. The bite is not fatal, but it can be quite painful and leave a red and irritated patch of skin around the wound.



Scolopendrid Centipede (*Hemiscolopendra marginata*)

Scolopendrid Centipedes are commonly found in leaf litter, under wood and stones, or even wandering the ground. Some are a bluish-gray, while others are more green or yellowish. They move underground like worms, stretching their bodies and contracting them, and eat invertebrates found in the soil. They also move above ground hunting small insects.



They may bite people if handled roughly. These bites are painful, but not life threatening, though medical attention may be useful if symptoms do not diminish in a few days. If found indoors and live capture is possible, releasing them into the garden helps control pest insects.

House Centipede (*Scutigera coleoptrata*)

The house centipede, the centipede normally found inside the home, is beneficial and feeds on silverfish, firebrats, carpet beetle larvae, cockroaches, spiders and other small arthropods. I think its long appendages and pale coloration give it a ghostly appearance. Identifying and getting rid of the food source using “sticky insect traps” is the first step in managing a house centipede problem. Outdoors, they are unlikely to survive the winter.



House centipede bites are uncommon its forcipules¹ are not strong enough to easily penetrate human skin. Bites are similar to a bee's sting, with its venom causing redness and mild to severe swelling.

¹ Forcipules are a unique feature found only in centipedes and in no other arthropods. The forcipules are modifications of the first pair of legs forming a pincer-like appendage are used in the capture of prey items, injecting venom and holding onto captured prey.

References:

Centipedes Eat Animals 15 Times Their Size Thanks To This Powerful Toxin

https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2018/01/22/centipedes-eat-animals-15-times-their-size-thanks-to-this-powerful-toxin-study-finds/?utm_term=.60071fda60b7

Centipedes of North America <https://www.insectidentification.org/centipedes.asp>

House Centipedes <http://ento.psu.edu/extension/factsheets/house-centipedes>

Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scutigera_coleoptrata