

Creepy Crawlies, How to avoid... Centipedes and Millipedes

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Most centipedes are nocturnal predators that feed on small arthropods; the largest scolopendrids have been reported to take mice, small birds, amphibia and reptiles. behind the obvious head, the flattened trunk comprises 15 to to well over 100 segments. The first pair of trunk appendages are powerful claws with ducts leading to large venom glands. Few temperate species are able to penetrate human skin with their poison claws, although bites of the small common *Lithobius forficatus* are described as sharply (if transiently) painful.

Bites of scolopendrid centipedes, which are common in the tropics and sub-tropics, inflict 'almost unbearable pain' but it fades in 20 minutes. There was a fatality attributed to centipede bite. In 1923 a seven year old Philippino died 29 hours after being bitten on the head by *Scolopendra subspinipes*. Although some large centipedes are capable of killing guinea pigs, generally they are considered to be painful rather than life-threatening.

Case History

A55 year old Yugoslavian woman accidentally swallowed a centipede. She vomited, cold-perspired, experienced palputations and then the animal was suddenly discharged from her bowl; later it was identified as *Scolopendra cingulata*.

Millipedes are more rounded in cross section and can be almost snake-like in appearance. They are detritus-eaters and possess no venom glands. When threatened though they secrete caustic fluids from repugnatorial glands. Some tropical species can squirt this fluid 50cm and if this enters the eyes causes immediate pain and swelling. Tropical millipedes not infrequently climb into bed with people. When the sleeper rolls onto them, the skin becomes blistered. These are powerful secretions; some are capable of killing lizards. Even so, in humans the inflammation generally settles after a week or two; usually no long term harm is done and there is no scarring.

Protection

When in the tropics, sleeping under a permethrin impregnated bednet tucked into the mattress protects from such accidents – as well as from mosquito bites.

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