

POISONology

SAFETY & FIRST AID TIPS FROM THE ARIZONA POISON AND DRUG INFORMATION CENTER

About tarantulas, the gentle giant



We live here in Arizona to enjoy the warm climate and unique vegetation. We are happy to live with other native species such as mule deer, desert tortoise and roadrunner.

Then, there is the mix of truth and folklore about the animal life that can be harmful to humans. To learn more about one of these creatures, we listened in on an exchange between our educator, Liz Barta, and Keith Boesen, the managing director here at the poison center.

Keith: I want to reassure people that, although tarantulas are large and look intimidating, they typically pose no threat to humans.

Liz: That's good to know!

Keith: Yes, these spiders are mainly nocturnal creatures (come out at night) and rarely wander far from their home. They spend much of their lives underground and eat smaller insects and even small mice and rats that pass close to their holes (homes).

Liz: When is someone most likely to see them?

Keith: Most often, people see them walking around at night during the late summer months. Those that are walking around are usually the male spiders looking for a female to mate. Shortly after this encounter, the males will die.

Liz: Are these spiders dangerous to people?

Keith: Tarantulas have two defense mechanisms that can affect humans. First is the hairs they are able to release from their back side. The hairs are very light and will carry in the air and attach to the skin. They are very irritating, causing a great deal of itching and redness.

Liz: How can someone deal with that?

Keith: The best way to treat this is to remove the hairs using tape, similar to removing lint off of clothing, or Elmer's glue. Put the glue on and allow it to dry. Once dry, you can peel it off and it will usually pull the hairs off with it. Antihistamines like Benadryl may also help to treat the itching symptoms.

Liz: Do tarantulas bite?

Keith: Yes. That's their second defense. They have impressive fangs, similar in size to a sharpened pencil. If you are bitten by a tarantula, it can be painful and cause some swelling but the pain does not last very long. The real danger can be infection and tetanus. So, be sure to clean the wound well and have your tetanus shots up to date.

Liz: So, as with most wildlife, it's best not to disturb them or try to pick them up.

Keith: Right!

If you have other poisoning concerns or questions call the tollfree national hotline at 1-800-222-1222 to reach your local poison center. If you live in Arizona outside of Maricopa County, this number will get you to our experts at the Arizona Poison and Drug Information Center in Tucson..