

Environmental Health Advice Note

PEST CONTROL SERIES

False Widow Spiders

There is no evidence of serious injury caused directly by the bite of any spider living in Britain.

Whilst spiders have biting mouthparts, most British spiders are not aggressive and are not capable of penetrating human skin if they tried.

False widow spiders are a group of species that look rather like the much more notorious Black widow spiders.

As a result of this and inaccurate stories in the media, they can cause some concern when found in Britain.

There are six species of false widow spider found in the UK, of which the most commonly found are:

the **Cupboard spider**;
the **Rabbit hutch spider**; and
the **Noble false widow spider**;
while the **False widow spider** is an occasional import in fruit shipments.

Of these the Noble false widow spider is the only one which can cause a significant bite on people, injecting a venom that has effects of the same order as a bee or wasp sting. However there is no history of severe allergic reactions as there can be for some people with bees or wasps.

These bites are not common; false widow spiders are not aggressive and do not attack people. They may try to bite as a defence if they are being swatted, squashed, or handled without care. Bites are painful and unpleasant but do not in themselves cause any lasting ill effects. Cases reported where people have needed hospital treatment tend, on proper examination, to be due to an infection that is most likely down to dirt getting in a small wound due to poor hygiene, perhaps through with dirty fingers. This might start with a bite, but equally this might arise with a splinter or other such puncture wound if poorly managed.

The Natural History Museum's advice is: "If bites do happen, clean the bite with mild soap and water to prevent infections. You may apply a cold pack to relieve the pain

and to slow the spread of venom, but don't apply ice directly on skin! Mild analgesics (painkillers) may help relieving the pain. If you begin to experience any serious symptoms, you should seek immediate medical help.”

False widow spiders do not carry human disease and are not regarded as public health pest species.

Provided reasonable care is taken, most people can live with false widows around their sheds, garden walls, fences and outhouses with no cause for worry.

They are not native British species and are not therefore protected as British wildlife is, and if you are concerned about them being in your home, you can remove them taking suitable precautions to avoid being bitten.

It should not be necessary to use professional pest control techniques, though private sector pest control operators are free to provide a service on request.

Like many councils, Harlow Council does not offer a treatment service for controlling spiders but we will always help where we can and offer advice and guidance to residents who are concerned.

Where we have reports of false widow spiders we ask residents to safely collect a sample in a sealed container so we can arrange a test and confirm the exact type of spider it is. We can then provide further advice if required.

Further useful information can be found on the following websites:

The Natural History Museum

www.nhm.ac.uk/natureplus/community/identification/blog/2014/12/23/fact-sheet-false-widow-spiders--steatoda-spp?fromGateway=true

Buglife

www.buglife.org.uk/love-spiders/spider-bites

British Pest Control Association – spiders

www.bpca.org.uk/pages/index.cfm?page_id=217

NHS Choices – treating insect bites

www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Bites-insect/Pages/Introduction.aspx