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## News Column

University of Nebraska Lincoln Extension

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### EVEN SPIDERS ARE AFRAID OF SPIDERS

Jonathan Lundgren , Ag Research Service Research Entomologist in Brooking South Dakota tells about his spider research. “Some time ago, we were feeding corn rootworm larvae to wolf spiders in Petri dishes (rootworms are the most expensive pest in the world to control, and happen to have some interesting anti-predator defenses). Wolf spiders are harmless to humans, but they are quick little devils. Often, the spider would dash out of the dish and directly into our laps. Although we reminded ourselves that our study subjects were "more scared of us than we are of them," we could not repress the regular screams of profanity that accompanied the spider's scurrying onto our persons.”

Many humans are pre-disposed to a fear of spiders, and we are not alone: insects fear spiders, too, although they have more to worry about than we do. Even spiders are afraid of spiders. A fear of spiders, or arachnophobia, is one of the most common phobias described in humans. One study found that the general population identifies images of spiders more quickly than those of peaceful things like mushrooms or flowers, and arachnophobias' are particularly adept at picking out the spiders from a melee of images. In severe cases of arachnophobia, the very image of the spider is unbearable to the patient, and treatments must resort to SLAT: spider less arachnophobia therapy. This therapy presents images that look kind of like a spider, such as the spokes on a wheel or the spreading legs of a tripod. In one study, to test whether the humans had begun to warm to the spiders following therapy, the researchers put an image of a spider at the end of an 82-foot long corridor, and told the subjects to walk as close as they felt comfortable. At the beginning of the therapy, some patients refused to even step into the corridor. Often, therapy helps people even with this strong level of aversion to creepy crawlies. In reality, humans have very little to fear from spiders. Insects - the main food of spiders - are another story. Insects suffer from arachnophobia as well. Mother crickets that live in a cage with wolf spiders, whose fangs have been gummed up to make them harmless, lay baby crickets that are more afraid of spiders than crickets born of naive mothers. Grasshoppers eat less and grow slower when spiders are around. Some aphids that become aware of spiders will drop from a plant out of fear.

For insects, there is a clear evolutionary advantage to having arachnophobia. All spiders make a living in part by eating other insects and spiders so those insects with a healthy fear of spiders will likely survive to a ripe old age, and have many more (frightened) children.

In reality, although bites are seldom pleasant, only one tenth of 1 percent of the 30,000 spider species are actually life threatening to humans, and most spider fangs cannot penetrate human skin. In Southeast Nebraska Brown Recluse and Rarely Black Widow are the only two poisonous species. Brown Recluse is the more common and rare bites are often on forearms and the arch of the foot, because of pinching the spider after putting on shirts or shoes that have not been used for some time. Checking clothing before putting it on is a great safety measure. It really begs the question of why so many us uncontrollably hate these eight-legged visitors.

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