

BENCHMARK • M

Spiders

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Introduction

Why do so many people fear spiders? Perhaps they don't know that most spiders are harmless. Even if spiders bite, their venom and fangs are usually not strong enough to hurt people. In fact, spiders help people by eating insects. If it were not for spiders, insects would eat almost everything.

There are more than 30,000 kinds of spiders. They are found all over the world. Most are less than one centimeter long. But some have bodies more than 7.6 centimeters (3 in) in length, with legs spreading even farther.

Tarantula



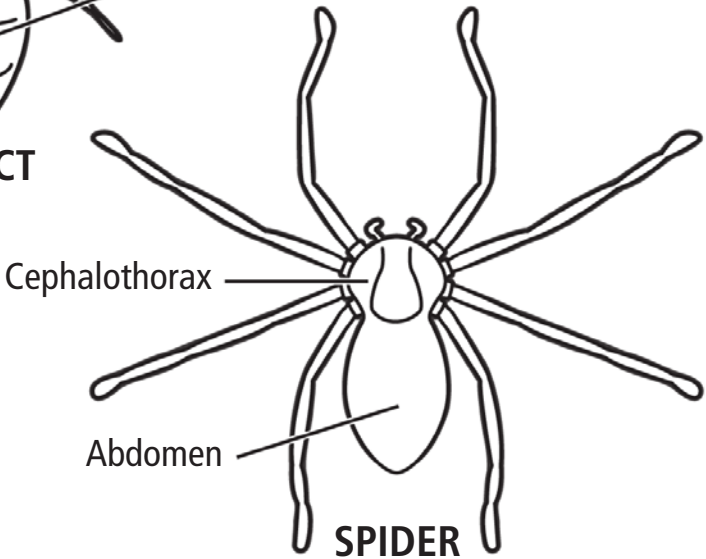
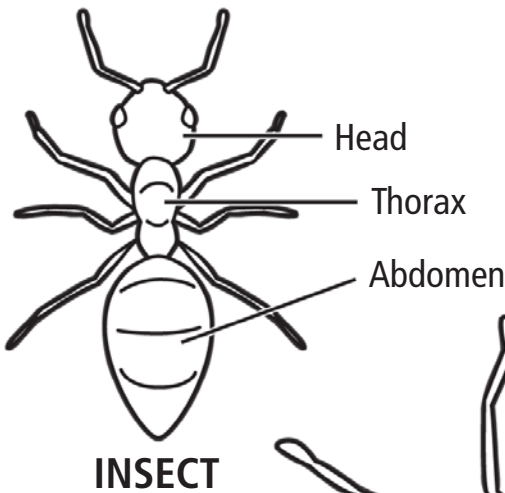


Fishing spider

Most spiders live on land. They live on the ground, on plants, in burrows, and on trees. A few spiders can live under water in ponds and streams. They carry air bubbles on the hairs of their bodies. They also build cocoons to store the air. Other spiders live on top of the water. They run across the water when they hunt.

What Is a Spider?

Spiders look a little like insects. But they are different from insects in many ways. Spiders always have eight legs, while insects have only six. Spider bodies have two parts, while insect bodies have three parts.



Spiders do not have wings, and they cannot fly on their own. But most insects have wings and can fly. Spiders do not have antennae on their heads. Insects do. Spiders have eight eyes. Most insects have only two. And spiders have fangs, while most insects do not.

Carpenter bee
(insect)



A jumping
spider



Crab spider with its prey

All spiders are meat eaters. They bite insects and inject venom through their fangs. The venom turns the insect's body to liquid. Then the spider sucks up its meal.



Spider Webs

One of the most unusual things about spiders is the webs they build. Spiders are born knowing how to build webs. They use sticky silk threads to trap insects. They walk on silk threads that are not sticky. The silk comes from special parts on the spider's back end called *spinnerets*.



Webs trap flying insects.

Webs come in many beautiful shapes. Circular webs catch flying insects. Webs on the ground are made to catch crawling insects.

Once an insect is caught, the spider wraps it in silk. The silk traps the insect so it cannot get away.



Early morning dew on spider webs



Funnel weaver

Some spiders build silk funnels or tunnels. When an insect crawls in the tunnel, the spider attacks. It traps the insect with its legs and bites the insect with its strong fangs.

Do You Know?

Spider silk is stronger than steel. Pretend a spider could make a web of silk as thick as a pencil. That web would be strong enough to stop a jumbo jet.



A spider releasing a silk parachute

Spiders also travel on their silk. They lower themselves down from high places. From a leaf or twig, spiders can toss a sticky silk thread into the air. When the thread catches on another twig or leaf, the spider can walk across. Some baby spiders make silk parachutes to travel. A parachute can carry a baby spider on the wind for over a hundred kilometers (62 mi).

Spiders Without Webs

Some spiders do not spin webs. The spitting spider spits sticky stuff onto insects. The insect cannot get away, and the spider bites it. Jumping spiders can jump far to land on the insects they eat.



Spitting spider

Trapdoor spiders build holes in the ground with silk trap doors over them. The spider springs up out of the door when an insect walks by.



Burrowing wolf spider

Tarantulas also spring out of holes. Some tarantulas are so big that they can catch birds and lizards.

Do You Know?

A black widow spider's venom is more powerful than a rattlesnake's. Luckily, black widows are small. They inject only a little bit of venom. Even so, a bite can be painful. But it usually does not kill a person. Female black widow spiders kill and eat the male after mating.



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