

Providing Leadership in Environmental Entomology

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Centipedes

Like spiders, centipedes are hunters that use venomous jaws to catch and eat insects and other small animals. Unlike slow moving millipedes, centipedes are fast runners which enable them to catch their food. They have many body parts with one pair of legs on most segments. Sometime they are referred to as *hundred-leggers*. Most centipedes vary in length from one to several inches.

Many centipedes live outdoors. One common group includes the stone centipedes. Outdoor centipedes are generally long, flattened and yellow to brownish in color. They live in moist, protected areas such as under mulch, leaf litter, logs and rocks. Most are active at night.



Stone centipedes are a common outdoor species.

The house centipede is commonly found indoors and has a hairier appearance than centipedes found outdoors. It is the only centipede species that can live and reproduce in homes. House centipedes are often found in areas where humidity is high including basements, storage areas, laundry rooms, garages and bathrooms. Similar to the outdoor centipedes, house centipedes come out of hiding at night to hunt for food.



The house centipede can become established indoors.

Bites of centipedes found in the United States are not toxic enough to be deadly to adults or children. In fact, the jaws of smaller centipedes are too weak to penetrate human skin. A centipede bite is comparable to a wasp sting. Although somewhat painful, the bites are generally harmless unless one is very allergic to venoms. Centipedes do not carry serious diseases and do not damage food or belongings in the home.

Nonchemical Control. If house centipedes are a problem, inspect the areas where they are seen. Look for moisture problems. Inspect for areas of clutter, especially storage boxes that provide a place for centipedes to hide. Also look for places where small insects and spiders, food for the centipedes, may be entering the home.

Correct moisture problems. If possible, use dehumidifiers in damp areas such as basements. Remove clutter and store items such as storage boxes away from walls and raise off the floor to reduce areas for house centipede to live. Make sure doorways and windows are well sealed and screened to prevent entry by other pests used as food for centipedes.

If outdoor centipedes are occurring in great numbers indoors, it is usually an indication that there is a large population in the area surrounding the home. To control these pests, the most important step is to remove materials that give them shelter in the immediate area around the home. This includes mulch, rocks, boards and similar materials. De-thatching the lawn near the house and mowing grass low allows for drier conditions in the yard which may reduce areas for centipedes to live near the home. Be sure that you do not over-water or have sprinkler systems close to the house creating excess moisture conditions. Finally, prevent outdoor centipedes from entering the house by making sure doors and windows fit tightly, and cracks and crevices are caulked.

In most situations, house centipedes and outdoor centipedes found indoors can be easily removed with a broom or vacuum.

Chemical Control. Pesticides provide only temporary control unless the non-chemical measures are taken as described above. However, if necessary, pesticide dusts such as boric acid powder applied to cracks, crevices and indoor void areas where centipede hide can be effective. Many pesticide powders will not work well if applied in areas that are too moist.

For centipedes found in crawl spaces or outside, pesticide sprays applied to foundation walls or other entry points can help reduce entry by centipedes. When treating leaf litter or mulch, use enough water to penetrate the

ground cover or rake the ground cover back before spraying to ensure that the pesticide reaches the areas where centipedes live. For pesticide applications both indoor and outdoors, make sure you only use products appropriately labeled for centipede control in the areas you are making your applications.

If centipedes are difficult to control on your own, consider hiring a licensed pest control operator. Pest control professionals have special equipment and pesticide formulations such as wettable powders, suspension concentrates, or microencapsulated products that may be able to provide better control than common, non-professional equipment and materials. For tips on hiring a professional, see our Insect Information Fact Sheet: *Choosing a Pest Control Company*, IIS/HS-23.

For other publications in our Entomology Insect Information Series visit our web site at <http://www.clemson.edu/esps>.

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