

The White-tailed Spider



by Tina Johnson
photographs by Aaron Beck

*Ready
to Read*

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Do you like spiders?

How do you feel about spiders? Would you like to keep one as a pet, or do you scream when you see one?

Often we are afraid of things because we don't know much about them.

The white-tailed spider has gained a bad name. News reports have blamed this spider for serious infections. But scientists now believe that the actual bite from a white-tail is not as serious as these reports suggested.



The facts

The white-tailed spider came to New Zealand from Australia over a hundred years ago.

The white-tailed spider has **venom**. It uses this poison to kill other spiders and insects.

The white-tailed spider has been known to bite people. This is most likely to happen when it is trapped in clothing or squashed in a shoe.

The white-tailed spider bite is usually only painful for a short time and leaves a small red mark that disappears after a few days. Most of the time, the bite doesn't cause any serious harm, but it is possible that the bite area could become infected.

The bite from a white-tailed spider leaves a red mark and can cause swelling.





What does the white-tailed spider look like?

The white-tailed spider has a long, dark grey body with a white patch at the end. It has orange-brown bands around its legs. There are special tufts of hair at the ends of the legs so that the spider can stick onto smooth or sloping surfaces easily. It also has two **palps** at the front of its body that it uses for grooming and tasting.



A white-tailed spider is about 12–15 millimetres long.



palps

side view



palps

fangs

Like all spiders, the white-tailed spider has **fangs!** It uses its fangs to inject venom.

front view



What do white-tailed spiders eat?

Unlike some other spiders, the white-tail doesn't spin a web to catch its food. It hunts at night, and it prefers to eat other spiders.



Sometimes when a white-tail wants a meal, it will hunt a spider by using the spider's own web. The white-tail places its front legs on the spider's web and moves them as if the web has trapped an insect. When the spider comes to see what it has caught, instead of finding dinner, it finds a white-tail. The white-tail opens its jaws and eats the spider!



Where do white-tailed spiders live?

White-tailed spiders prefer to live under bark and plants. They can also be seen inside houses, where they look for dark places to hide during the day. They often hide in clothing or shoes that are left on the floor – and that can mean trouble!



So, now that you know the facts about white-tailed spiders, how do you feel about them?

Do you think they deserve their bad name?



If you think you *have* been bitten by a white-tailed spider:

- Tell an adult.
- Use warm soapy water or an antiseptic to clean the bite area.
- Put ice on the bite area to help reduce any swelling. Make sure you wrap the ice in a cloth first.

People react to stings and bites in different ways. If the bite area becomes very red or if blisters appear, you should see a doctor.



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