

What's Eating You? Millipedes (Diplopoda)

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Identifying Features

Millipedes have long, cylindrical, wormlike bodies composed of many segments (Figure). Each segment has 2 pairs of legs and 2 pairs of respiratory spiracles. The mouth is associated with 2 pairs of modified appendages. Biting jaws are absent. One pair of antennae is present. Millipedes are vegetarians and forage for food, mostly at night.

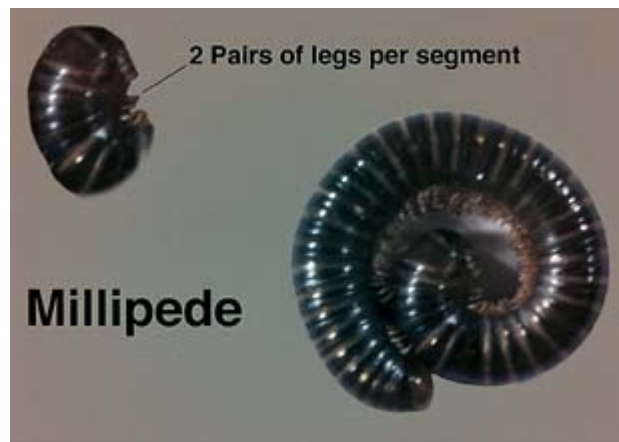
Adverse Reactions

Although millipedes do not bite, they secrete noxious substances that result in "millipede burns." Millipede burns frequently involve the eyes and may be serious.^{1,2} Millipede secretions have been reported to cause a mahogany discoloration of the skin,³ which may persist for months and is often so striking that it suggests gangrene.

Benzoquinones are the major irritants in millipede secretions.^{4,5} Oxidation of the benzoquinones may account for the mahogany color of the burns.³ Some millipedes also produce hydrocyanic acid.⁶ The arcuate burnlike lesions produced by millipede contact may be easily mistaken for signs of child abuse. Even well-trained dermatologists have mistaken the mahogany marks for burns from a hot wire.⁶

Millipede burns have occurred during the night from millipedes in bedsheets. Laundry dried on a clothesline has been implicated as a source of millipede exposure.⁶ Children may come in contact with millipedes in their clothing, pajamas, or sheets. Shoes are another common source of contact, usually resulting in lesions localized to the toes.

Some millipedes are capable of spraying noxious secretions. Eye lesions commonly result from the de-



Millipedes have 4 legs per segment (2 pairs) and rounded wormlike bodies.

fensive spray of a millipede. Although most millipedes only exude defensive secretions, some species that spray are capable of projecting secretions as far as 25 cm.^{1,7}

Histologic Analysis

Histologic evaluation of burns reveals full-thickness epidermal necrosis.⁶ The changes are nonspecific, and the diagnosis depends on physical examination and history.

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