

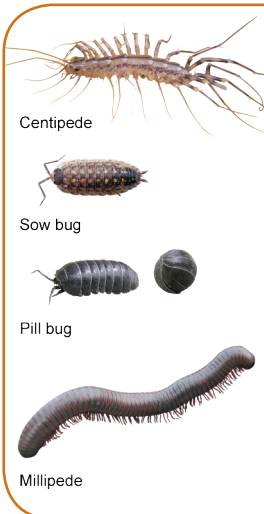


Centipedes, millipedes, sowbugs and pillbugs

Pest Note



Photos courtesy of: Dr. Henri Goulet, Canadian National Collection of Insects



Photos: Dr. Henri Goulet Canadian National Collection of Insects



House Centipede Photos: Dr. Henri Goulet Canadian National Collection of Insects

Centipedes, millipedes, sowbugs and pillbugs: What are they?

Centipedes, millipedes, sowbugs and pillbugs are arthropods, not insects, although they do enjoy the same living conditions as insects. These creatures are not harmful. They are merely unattractive and considered a nuisance, especially when found indoors.

Sowbugs and pillbugs

Sowbugs and pillbugs are less than 2 cm long and are usually dark to slate gray. They are armadillo-like and belong to the same class of animals as lobsters and shrimps. These tiny land crustaceans need moist conditions to survive and like to live under rocks or debris where they feed on decaying organic matter. They usually die quickly once inside the home because the moisture level is not high enough for them.

Sowbugs and pillbugs carry their eggs in a pouch until they hatch, and continue to carry the young for six to eight weeks after hatching. They do not breed in winter unless they are in a warm enough site, like a cellar or a greenhouse.

Millipedes and centipedes

Wormlike millipedes and centipedes are similar in that they both have many body sections and many legs. However, there are several basic differences. The centipede has a more flattened body and only one pair of legs per section, while the millipede's body is rounded on top with two pairs of legs per section. Also, the centipede's legs are much longer, allowing it to move more quickly. When disturbed, millipedes tend to coil up, but centipedes swiftly run for the closest dark hiding place.

Centipedes and millipedes lay eggs in the soil in the spring and summer. The young moult (shed their skin) several times as they mature, adding new body sections and legs with each moulting. It may take them months, or more typically, one year or more to reach maturity, and they may live as long as five to seven years, depending on the environment.

They like to eat other home invaders like spiders, bed bugs, cockroaches, silverfish, carpet beetles or ants. In fact, centipedes are an efficient way of controlling other insect pests in your home. Millipedes, on the other hand, do not survive once in the home because it is too dry for them.

The House Centipede

Originally from Mexico, house centipedes are now among the most common centipedes in North America. They will invade houses if the sub-floor, drains, basement or bathroom areas are excessively damp. They will also come indoors in the fall when the weather turns colder. They have 15 pairs of legs and long antennae, and are about 2.5 cm – 5.0 (1-2 in.) long. House centipedes have the unique ability to reproduce indoors. They are born with four pairs of legs and will mature over three years, adding more body sections and legs at each moult. They can move quickly and will hide in cracks, crevices, and behind baseboards. They sometimes like to hide under the bark of firewood stored inside the home.

What can they do?

Although all centipedes have poison glands that open through the jaws, most house centipedes are not able to penetrate human skin with a bite. However, the few that can will give an effect similar to a mild bee sting with symptoms generally disappearing within a few hours. Similarly, the house centipede's bite will not cause any serious harm to pets like dogs and cats.

Responsible Pesticide Use

Before Purchasing a Pesticide

- Identify the pest correctly.
- Use physical control methods and alternatives to pesticides.
- Read the label directions and safety precautions before buying the product. The label must include the name of the pest to be controlled and the treatment location (e.g., indoor, outdoor, garden uses, pet treatment).
- Purchase only the quantity of product needed for the treatment.
- Consider hiring a licensed pest control operator.

Using a Pesticide

- Carefully read all label instructions and precautions before using pesticides.
- Do not drink, eat or smoke while applying pesticides.
- Persons and pets should vacate the area during treatment. Cover or remove aquaria.
- If kitchen area is to be treated, cover or remove food, dishes and utensils.

After Using a Pesticide

- Always wash your hands thoroughly after handling any pesticide product.





Remove leaf litter around the foundation.



Diatomaceous earth is non-toxic to humans and pets.

Sowbugs and pillbugs can sometimes enter damp areas of the house in large numbers. However, they do not bite, sting, or transmit diseases, and they don't infest food, clothing or wood.

Sowbugs, pillbugs and millipedes break down organic matter, releasing nutrients to garden plants, and centipedes help control other insect pests. For these reasons, this group can be considered beneficial and should be tolerated as much as possible.

A persistent infestation of sowbugs, pillbugs or millipedes indoors may indicate a serious moisture problem within the home, and the presence of a food source, like rotting wood.

How can I manage them?

It is most efficient to reduce the source of infestation outside your home first.

- Make sure the ground slopes away from your house to avoid water and moisture retention near the building foundation.
- Remove leaf litter and decaying vegetation around the foundation of your home. Other objects providing hiding places on the ground, like stones, boards, or boxes, should be moved away as well.
- Use coarse (instead of fine) mulches that allow water to drain.
- Foundation plantings should be pruned and cleaned to improve ventilation around the home.
- Allow the soil to dry between waterings.
- Repair cracks in foundation walls or around windows before the fall.
- Indoors, use a dehumidifier or a small electric fan to dry out damp areas in the basement.

Products

Changing the habitat of these creatures should reduce their numbers. If these efforts do not control them well enough, you may choose to use a registered domestic-class pesticide product. Note that using a pesticide indoors to control millipedes, sowbugs or pillbugs would rarely be advisable as they will soon die from dehydration.

Diatomaceous earth, an active ingredient found in many domestic pesticides, is composed of crushed microscopic marine organisms and is an ecological means of control. This powdery dust is much like an abrasive. It damages the outer waxy coating on the skin of arthropods that normally would prevent water loss, and they die from dehydration after coming into contact with the dust. This powder can be used in cracks and crevices as an ongoing control measure.

Other registered active ingredients include permethrin and pyrethrins. Some products are sprayed onto foundations, while others are applied indoors in cracks and crevices, along baseboards and across thresholds. Read the label to be sure the product is intended for use inside the home.

Did you know...

Sowbugs differ from pillbugs in that they cannot roll up into a tight ball like a pillbug. Also, the sowbug has two tail-like appendages that the pillbug does not have.



Photo: University of Nebraska-Lincoln

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Phone from outside Canada: 613-736-3799 (long distance charges apply)
Fax: 613-736-3798
www.healthcanada.gc.ca/pmra



- Do not permit persons or pets to contact treated surfaces until residue has dried completely.
- Provide adequate ventilation of treated areas after use.
- Wipe clean all surfaces that come in direct contact with food, such as counters, tables and stovetops, including indoor and outdoor surfaces.
- Always store pesticides out of reach of children and pets and away from food and beverages.

Accidental Poisoning

- Call a poison control centre immediately and seek medical attention.
- Take the pesticide container or label with you to the emergency facility or physician.
- Follow first aid statements on the label.
- In case of accidental poisoning of pets seek veterinary attention immediately.
- Report pesticide incidents to manufacturers (phone number on label). They are required to send them to Health Canada.

Disposing of Pesticides

- Do not reuse empty pesticide containers. Wrap and dispose of in household garbage.
- Follow the product label instructions or contact provincial authorities for disposal of pesticides.

Note: These are general recommendations. Consult the label for specific instructions. When in doubt, contact a professional.

Health Canada

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