

Colorado Arthropod of Interest

House Centipede

Scientific Name: *Scutigera coleoptrata* (L.)

Class: Chilopoda (Centipedes)
Order: Scutigermorpha (House centipedes)
Family: Scutigeridae (House centipedes)



Figure 1. House centipede.

Description and Distinctive Features: The house centipede (Figure 1) has 15 pairs of extraordinarily long legs, the last pair often exceeding the body length (Figure 2). The overall body is usually grayish-yellow and marked with three stripes running longitudinally. Banding also occurs on the legs.

A pair of very long antennae protrude from the head (Figure 3). The eyes, although not prominent, are larger than found with most other centipedes. Full-grown the body length typically ranges from 1- 1 ½ inches; with the legs and antennae extended it may be 3-4 inches.

Distribution in Colorado: Native to the Mediterranean, the house centipede has spread over much of the world, largely with the aid of human transport. Potentially it can occur in any home in the state.

Life History and Habits: Typical of all centipedes, the house centipede is a predator of insects and other small invertebrates, immobilizing them with a pair of specialized fang-like front legs (maxillipeds). They are normally active at night but may hunt during the day in dark indoor rooms.

The house centipede is the only centipede that can adapt to indoor life, provided it has some access to moisture. Populations also develop outdoors although they are rarely seen. With the advent of cool weather in autumn some house centipedes may migrate into buildings, causing an increase in sighting during late summer and early fall.



Figure 2. House centipede, side-view. Some legs are missing on the left side of the body.

Eggs are laid in spring and the minute first stage has only four pairs of legs. During the next six molts additional segments and legs are produced, ultimately reaching 15 pairs. Some additional development must then occur before they are sexually mature. Adults can be long lived, living three years and perhaps longer.

Their long legs allow the house centipede to run extremely quickly. When exposed in a darkened room by switching on a light they rapidly scurry for cover. Sometimes they move in the direction of the human, an action that may be misinterpreted as an “attack”. In reality, with their poor vision and chemical senses, any movement towards a person is either random or done because the person is perceived as a large mass that can provide cover.

House centipedes are not aggressive and will bite only if physically confined. The mouthparts (including the maxillipeds) are fairly weak and can only penetrate skin with difficulty. The bites are reportedly mildly painful.



Figure 3. The head of a house centipede.