



Sentinel-Standard/BRANDON LACIC

Cindy Geiger, of Ionia, stands in the yard where she believed she was bitten by a Brown Recluse spider earlier this month. She has something to smile about because she is recovering well, and has learned life lessons.

Dangerous bite

□ *Ionia woman could have lost limb after being bitten by Brown Recluse spider*

By **BRANDON LACIC**
Sentinel-Standard
managing editor

IONIA — It's been nearly one month since Cindy Geiger's gruesome run-in with a venomous foreign insect, and the bullet-sized hole in her left leg still hasn't closed.

What began as a typical fall day for the 48-year-old Ionia resident became a nightmare — one that would span more than a month and in which she nearly lost her leg. However, from this experience Geiger learned something about the community in which she lives, and the importance of seeking quick medical attention.

Geiger believes that three weeks ago, while raking leaves in her yard on Jermyn Street — a task she has undertaken for the past 27 years without incident — she was bitten by a Brown Recluse spider, or

Loxosceles reclusa — one of the most debilitatingly poisonous spiders in North America.

Later the same night Geiger noticed a small brown scab on her inner thigh approximately five inches above her left knee. She thought it was a sliver.

Soon Geiger became very ill — nauseated, feverish and disoriented. Being fatally allergic to bee stings, Geiger had the presence of mind to seek medical attention soon after she became sick.

See **BITE** Page 2

From Page 1 Bite

A doctor at the Ambulatory Care Clinic of Ionia on South State Street diagnosed the cause almost immediately. He told Geiger the symptoms were consistent with those of a bite from the small Brown Recluse spider.

The spider's venom, known as a cytotoxic poison, acts almost like an acid, eating through body tissue and blood cells. Left untreated, the venom can spread to an entire area eventually causing a loss of the contaminated limb, or death.

In Geiger's case the extent of damage to her leg was limited because she was quick in seeking and receiving responsive medical treatment — a lesson she wants to impart on others in the community.

"The important thing is to recognize it right away and get help from your doctor," Geiger urges.

She was placed on antibiotics, and it would still be several days before medical staff could perform the most painful and repulsive aspect of the treatment.

In the interim Geiger was in excruciating pain. Within days the small bite became a large purple splotch encompassing an area of her leg the size of a fist.

As a daycare provider, Geiger had a difficult time coping with her severe illness while caring for the children. She was only able to

maintain her sole source of income with help from a close-knit group of family, friends and assistants.

Geiger received daily rides to the clinic from a neighbor, where she received a shot to ward off infection. It was during her treatment she realized the extensive care provided by the clinic staff and its immeasurable benefit to the Ionia area, she said.

"People don't realize we have such a great facility here in Ionia," Geiger said. "They're knowledgeable and professional. I received better care there than I would have even at a Grand Rapids hospital."

After a week the pain was immense and a small red growth began to appear at the epicenter of the bite. The area around the bite had doubled in size, and was red, hard and hot to the touch.

"It was as big as a softball," Geiger said of the lump beneath her skin.

The purple growth at the bite center was also growing. At its worse the nodule protruded some three inches from Geiger's leg in what is known as a "volcanic lesion." It was then the doctor decided to open the wound.

"It looked like a horn growing out of my leg," Geiger said.

Using a razor the physician made a quick crossing motion on the swelled area, and with assistance from nurses forced the lump of dead and infectious tissue from her leg — leaving a gaping cavity approximately four

inches deep and nearly two inches wide.

Now, more than three weeks later, the swelling has gone down and the hole is half the size. Well on her way to recovery, Geiger has gleaned some positive lessons from the ordeal. She has realized the value of attentive and caring medical treatment close to home, and that it is important to seek medical treatment as soon as possible, even if the injury does not seem, at first, to warrant it.

"That's what I want people to come away with — don't wait," Geiger said.

And what about the suspect spider believed to be at the root of Geiger's pain and suffering? It was never seen. Geiger believes the spider was either in one of the 300 bags of leaves in her yard while she was raking, or in her clothes before she raked leaves.

According to Michigan State University's Entomology department, the spider's natural habitat ranges from the eastern Rocky Mountains to as far north as southern Ohio, but Michigan temperatures are too extreme for the one-half inch-long arachnid. It is not aggressive, so Geiger would have had to unknowingly made direct contact with it.

Bill Steenwyk, Director of the Ionia County MSU Extension, said it is highly unlikely Geiger was bitten by a Brown Recluse living in the wild, but said self-sustaining populations of these spiders living in abandoned

buildings such as warehouses or factories have been reported sparsely throughout the state.

"It is not indigenous to this area, and cannot survive outside," Steenwyk said, adding that the Northern Black Widow is the only native venomous spider in Michigan. The Northern Black Widow, common in outdoors areas in Michigan's lower peninsula, releases a small amount of venom which affects the human nervous system, resulting in muscle cramps, swelling, headaches, tremors, stuttering and fever. Death from Black Widow bites is rare, but have occurred reported in the past.

Geiger has a thesis as to how the eight-legged insect made its way to her property. She lives directly across the street from where the abandoned former Hollywood Nights building once stood, which caught fire and was subsequently demolished earlier this year. Geiger believes it was during the fire or the demolition of the remaining structure that the spider, or spiders, made their way across the street.

Paul Lewis, Director of Environmental Health at the Ionia County Health Department, said there are no other documented cases of Brown Recluse spider bites in the area, and he said it is not something residents should not worry about.

"There are no other cases of this in Ionia County — not that I'm aware of."