



## Millipedes, Sowbugs, Pillbugs and Centipedes: In and Around the Home



**Fig. 1.** Typical millipedes found most often in and around structures. (Photograph University of Wisconsin – Madison, Department of Entomology)



**Fig. 2** Pillbugs. (Note the absence of appendages on the hind end and the pillbugs rolled into a ball on the right side). (Photograph F. E. Wood, HGIC, University of Maryland)

These many-legged creatures are not insects, but are in several other groups of Arthropods. Occasionally millipedes, sowbugs, pillbugs, and centipedes may be found in moist areas of the home, such as in rotting wood or under piles of moist debris in basements, near patio doors, and in garages. Outdoors they are not uncommon and may be seen near foundation walls, under logs, in piles of leaves and in gardens. Occasionally large numbers of millipedes leave the soil and crawl onto and into houses, if there are openings through which they can enter. Once indoors, they may be an extreme nuisance to home dwellers. In a few instances invasions have been noted after periods of extremely wet weather, persisting for a few weeks or until cold weather.

The House centipede is the only one of these arthropods that is frequently found indoors. This species is discussed later in the factsheet.

### Description

**Millipedes**, sometimes called "thousand leggers," have elongated, segmented worm-like bodies with short antennae and 2 pairs of legs per body segment (**Fig. 1**). They crawl slowly across the ground, and when disturbed, roll themselves into a coil. In New York State, those most often seen around the home are brownish in color, rounded in profile and about 1 to 1 1/2 inches in length. A few species, which occur in wooded areas, however, may exceed 4 inches in length. A second more flattened form of millipede is not uncommon.

**Sowbugs and pillbugs (Fig. 2)** are oval, dark-gray, hard-shelled arthropods with 7 pairs of legs. They reach about 1/2 inch in length. They too are found in moist places under debris or in damp soil where decaying vegetation is the usual food, but like millipedes, they can cause some damage to young plants. Pillbugs can roll up into a tight ball when disturbed; sowbugs do not roll up as tightly.

**Centipedes** ("hundred-leggers") are elongated, short-legged, flattened arthropods with 15 or more pairs of legs. There is one pair of legs per body segment (**Fig. 3**) and the antennae are prominent. When disturbed, centipedes often run for cover.

Centipedes can deliver a somewhat painful, venomous bite and should be handled with appropriate care. They are not likely to infest houses unless conditions are quite moist and prey is abundant.

**Biology and Life History:** Centipedes, sowbugs, pillbugs, and millipedes are primarily nocturnal, avoiding light.

Millipedes, sowbugs, and pillbugs normally live outdoors where they feed on decaying vegetation. Occasionally they will attack the stems and roots of young plants, or they may feed on tubers or vegetables stored in cellars or basements. This, however, most frequently happens in the presence of previous damage.

Millipedes deposit eggs in clusters in the soil throughout the summer. Young hatch from the eggs and undergo a series of molts, during which the number of segments is increased. It often takes more than one year to reach sexual maturity.

The females of sowbugs and pillbugs carry the young in a pouch on the underside of her body until the young leave the pouch. They may have 2 or more broods per year. Sowbugs often live to be 2 years old.

Centipedes are predaceous, feeding on insects, spiders and other small animals. They do not cause damage to plants.



**Fig. 3.** A centipede. (Note the one pair of legs per body segment). (Photograph HGIC, University of Maryland)



**Fig. 4.** A house centipede. Note the very long legs and antennae compared to those on the centipede in Fig. 3. (Photograph University of Wisconsin – Madison, Department of Entomology)

**Management:** In the home, millipedes, sowbugs, and centipedes may be swept up and disposed of outdoors. Correct the conditions that lead to excess moisture indoors, repair cracks in foundations, and caulk around basement windows and other entryways. Keep ground level entrance areas free of decaying leaves and debris.

Outdoors, removing mulches or piles of leaves or other organic matter from areas adjacent to the foundation can help reduce the number of these arthropods. This removes the cover and allows the area to dry out some - conditions that millipedes, centipedes, sowbugs and pillbugs do not favor. Trim shrubs or other plantings to promote air circulation near foundations, patios, and other similar places to allow additional drying.

Generally, pesticides are not very effective against millipedes, especially if they are migrating in to the area. Migrations occur when it is too wet or too dry in their natural habitat. They are often found on the shady side of houses or buildings - they dislike direct sunlight as it may cause them to dry out and die. In terms of management, sweeping up or using a shop vac to vacuum them up and then disposing of them is a good practice. In some places this may mean at least once a day, sometimes more. Sealing them in a heavy duty garbage bag usually works, and they can be placed in the trash or put out in the sun which "cooks" them first.

If necessary a perimeter treatment near foundations, entryway, and near basement doors and windows, of a registered pesticide may be used. Pesticides are only temporary and unless the habitat is altered to make it unsuitable, these arthropods will move back in. Registered pesticides in New York State in 2009 include boric acid powder and diatomaceous earth (two least toxic options), as well as certain products containing cyfluthrin, deltamethrin, lambda-cyhalothrin, or permethrin (with other ingredients), if labeled for millipede, sowbug, or centipede control.

Pesticides may be applied as a perimeter treatment, or if labelled for indoor use,

may be applied to baseboard cracks, crevices, openings in concrete slabs, or other hiding places.

**House Centipede** (*Scutigera coleoptera*): The house centipede (**Fig. 4**) differs from the above-related arthropods in that it is fragile and long legged. It is gray to light brown, and about 1 inch in length. It is the only common house-infesting centipede. It is sometimes observed running across floors at great speed.

House centipedes prefer to live in moist areas, but they forage actively at night and may be found in drier areas of the home as well. They are predaceous, feeding on insects, spiders and other small animals. They do not cause damage to plants.

In a home where house centipedes are present, controlling the insects or spiders that they may be feeding on is a good first step toward reducing their numbers.

---

Reprinted from *Millipedes, Sowbugs, Pillbugs and Centipedes: In and Around the Home* by Carolyn Klass, Senior Extension Associate & Edward M. Raffensperger, Professor, Department of Entomology, Cornell University. 5/1973. 5/2005 Revised by Carolyn Klass. Updated 12/2009

The Pesticide Management Education Program (PMEP), in cooperation with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC), maintains a web site with a searchable database for pesticide products currently registered in New York State. Individuals who have Internet access can locate currently registered products containing the active ingredients suggested above at <http://pims.psur.cornell.edu/> (NYS PIMS).

**This publication contains pesticide recommendations. Changes in pesticide regulations occur constantly and human errors are still possible. Some materials mentioned may no longer be available, and some uses may no longer be legal. All pesticides distributed, sold or applied in New York State must be registered with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (NYSDEC). Questions concerning the legality and/or registration status for pesticide use in New York State should be directed to the appropriate Cornell Cooperative Extension Specialist or your regional NYSDEC office. Read the label before applying any pesticide.**

TK 1/2010, AW 11/2011