By LAURIE SMITH ANDERSON

Mella Rodriguez of Port Allen woke up one morning to find two tiny bites on the side of her upper leg. The next day, the area had become a hard knot and by noon had become the size of a large pancake.

"I was scared. When I touched my leg, I could feel pain all the way down to my toes," she said.

After she showed it to her husband, they rushed to the doctor's office. They were sent to the hyperbaric unit at Our Lady of the Lake Regional Medical Center.

"When I got there, they were running around like I was a heart attack patient... I was crying by that time. I was worried about the bite; I was afraid I might lose my leg... I didn't know what to expect," Rodriguez explained.

Rodriguez, who is sensitive to insect bites and stings, had been bitten twice by a brown recluse spider. The toxin was spreading quickly through her leg and tissue was dying, explained Dr. Kelly Hill, OLOL's medical director of hyperbaric medicine.

The brown recluse spider is very common in the south and is particularly active this time of year, when a lot of bites are seen. Hill said the hyperbaric unit treats 10 to 12 serious bites each year.

The spider is about the size of a quarter and has a violin-shaped mark on its back. It likes dark, undisturbed places and can be found among rocks, in dark holes, wood piles, sheds, trash piles and inside homes. Anyone bitten by a spider should watch closely for reaction and seek prompt medical treatment if necessary, he said. Redness and swelling which continue to spread can be cause for alarm. If the skin tissue begins to blacken or becomes an open sore, that is particularly serious. A red streak means infection.

"Bites by the brown recluse spider can be very dangerous, although not everyone has a reaction as serious as Rodriguez's," Hill said. Several years ago, treatment in the hyperbaric unit helped prevent her from losing her leg.

The brown recluse spider is about the size of a quarter.
serious cases involved surgery — removal of all the dead tissue, followed by skin grafts.

Hyperbaric therapy neutralizes the spider’s poisonous venom and stops it from spreading, he said.

It’s important to get into treatment quickly before too much damage is done. Rodriguez was lucky to get prompt referrals, he said. Although the language of hyperbarics has its roots in oceanography, patients are not treated underwater — a common misconception, he said. Instead, atmospheric pressure is used to deliver intense oxygen therapy to patients with chronic wounds and infections that do not respond to other forms of treatment.

Rodriguez had high-pressure oxygen treatments in the hospital’s hyperbaric chamber twice a day for three days. By the third day, Rodriguez’ bites were barely noticeable and her skin had returned to normal color.

“I’m thrilled. I never even had a cortisone shot or antibiotics. There was another lady in treatment with me who had been bitten by a spider, but didn’t get here as quickly as I did.

“She had a big hole in her leg.... just feel really lucky,” she said.