

“Bites” Not Always From Bugs

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The November/December NEBLINE featured an article about the itch mite epidemic of 2004. This epidemic was notable because it involved thousands of victims living in well-defined neighborhoods in Lincoln surrounded by oak trees. Nearly all described the same bite scenario. Excellent scientific investigation and a powerful microscope helped UNL entomologists find the connection between oak trees and bite victims.

In November 2004, I attended a symposium at the national entomology conference in Salt Lake City that was titled, “Delusory Parasitosis, a.k.a., Ekbom’s Syndrome. Six nationally known experts discussed how entomologists can help people who are plagued by mystery bites — bites where no insect pests, mites or spiders can be found.

Experts say that the word “bite” is probably not a good term to use, especially when no bugs are found. This is because the word *bite* implies that there is actually a biter doing the biting. In reality, the sensation of being bitten has a number of causes that range from medical conditions, drug use (either prescribed or illegal), and allergies to food, personal products or environmental

allergens or even dry skin. These sensations are so real afflicted people may even think they are infested with bugs.

According to Dr. Nancy Hinkle, medical entomologist, University of Georgia, victims are convinced this is an entomological problem, but it is much more likely to be a medical problem. Disease or medical conditions contributing to prickling or itchy skin include diabetes, HIV, autoimmune diseases (lupis), hypothyroidism, multiple sclerosis, hepatitis, Parkinson’s disease, vitamin deficiency, renal failure, heavy metal poisoning and cirrhosis of the liver.

Skin infections or conditions can often look like bites. Skin rashes or “bite-like” bumps can be caused by bacteria or even fungi. Again, this is a medical problem that must be treated by a physician.

Persons taking some prescription medications may have the sensation that their skin is crawling. Drugs that may cause this unwanted side effect include Viagra, Lipitor, Zocor, Prevacid, Zoloft, Procrit, Zyprexa, Epogen, Nexium and Celebrex.

Allergic contact dermatitis occurs when skin comes in contact with an allergen and can result in rashes and itching. The allergen can be a substance in a product that a person has used for many years; it does not have to be a new product. An allergist

or dermatologist can be helpful in treating skin rashes and identifying allergies.

There is sometimes a seasonality to mystery bites. In the fall of the year, we always get a few phone calls from people who complain about itchy skin and biting bugs. These complaints nearly always coincide with the furnace being turned on and being subjected to drier, electrostatic-charged air.

Sometimes persons who experience skin itches make their problem worse because they begin to use ointments, harsh cleaners and disinfectants and even pesticides on their skin and bedding to kill what they think is a pest problem. In one case, an elderly lady was soaking her feet in bleach water because she thought she had fleas (even though she couldn’t see them). The bleach water was causing her skin to redden, crack and be itchy, reinforcing her belief that she was being infested.

Ekbom’s Syndrome was first described by Karl Axel Ekbom, a Swedish neurologist, in 1938. He described a rare situation where a person imagines the symptoms of parasitic infestation of the skin. The person describes bugs, worms or mites that are biting, crawling or burrowing into, under or out of the skin. Afflicted people often describe bugs that nobody else can see. In a desperate attempt to solve this problem, these individuals bring samples

to health care professionals or entomologists that cannot be identified. Ekbom’s Syndrome is also known as delusory parasitosis.

According to Dr. Jerome Goddard, medical entomologist, Mississippi State Health Department, the most likely person suffering from delusory parasitosis is a post-menopausal woman, although men are not exempt from this condition. Other factors that seem to be associated with delusory parasitosis include:

- The person experienced a real pest infestation in the past, such as a fleas or head lice.
- There is a history of legal or illegal drug use.
- The person may have suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder.
- The person may be lonely or socially isolated.

In about 70 percent of Dr. Goddard’s cases, the loss of a loved one was the event that seemed to trigger these delusions. Other types of stress may also trigger these delusions. One man, who described “worms” crawling out of his pores, confessed that his problems started after his grown son was disabled after being in a car accident. Other traumatic experiences that may trigger delusions include job-related pressures, personal relationships, divorce, loneliness, financial problems and loss of a pet. Reducing or learning to deal with stress may help eliminate or

reduce delusory parasitosis.

Experts suspect younger persons who claim to see bugs crawling out of their skin or living in their carpet may be illegal drug users. Chronic methamphetamine and cocaine users may have sensations of their skin crawling and then pick at their skin until it bleeds. The terms “meth mites” and “cocaine bugs” describe these delusions.

For persons who have been diagnosed with delusory parasitosis, medications may be helpful, but a physician or psychiatrist must be consulted. A powerful antipsychotic drug, pimozide (Orap) may be prescribed for these delusions.

Entomologists and pest control professionals can help solve real pest problems, but are not medical doctors and cannot treat medical conditions, skin disorders, unwanted drug side effects, allergies or psychiatric problems so we usually refer people to medical experts. These people often can be treated successfully once they are under the care of an appropriate physician.

For more information about this interesting subject, refer to an article, Delusory Parasitosis, written by Nancy Hinkle. This article was first published in the American Entomologist (Vol. 46, number 1, pp. 17-25). It can be found on the Internet at www.ent.uga.edu/publications/delusory.pdf

Preventing Rabbit Damage in Your Yard

Eastern cottontail rabbits are common in Lancaster County. These rabbits can cause damage any time of year. In winter, the rabbits gnaw tender bark off young trees and shrubs and eat the green, inner bark. Rabbits can easily stand on drifted snow to reach the young bark on woody trunks and stems higher than three feet.

To control cottontail rabbits, a combination of methods usually works best.

Trapping is one option and is most successful during winter and early spring when food is scarce. Live traps can be purchased or made. Good cold-weather baits include cabbage, ear corn, dried apple and dried alfalfa or clover. Replace with

fresh baits and check traps daily. During winter, place traps in sheltered areas and cover them with heavy canvas or cloth to guard the captured animal against cold.

Consider placing boards or one-foot high fences alongside the trap to help funnel rabbits into the trap. Approach a trapped rabbit slowly and quietly to keep the animal from injuring itself. Rabbits should be released safely in areas with suitable habitat and where they aren’t likely to cause more problems.

Cottontails and jackrabbits are game animals in Nebraska. Rabbit hunting with firearms is allowed during the winter with a small game hunting permit (for information, contact the Ne-

braska Game and Parks Commission). Nebraska code allows the removal of rabbits within municipalities that cause damage to personal property.

In most cities and towns, your local animal control or law enforcement agency can authorize live trapping and transporting of rabbits. Firearms cannot legally be discharged within most municipalities.

In addition to trapping, here are other options to prevent rabbit damage:

For the gardener, the most permanent solution is to build a **rabbit-proof fence** around your garden. A one-inch mesh fence of poultry netting (chicken wire) is suitable. You might also try a two-foot high fence made of poultry netting and 3/8-inch fence rods spaced at three feet apart. For about \$50 (2003 prices), you can protect a 25 x 50 foot garden space.

For the owner of a perennial flower bed, the best approach may be to use **motion-activated water sprays** or a **vigilant dog** during the day to distract rabbits. You might also use a low, aesthetic plastic-mesh fence around flowers to protect the emerging blossoms. Keeping the soil wet may also repel rabbits from gardens or flower beds.

If you have young trees and shrubs in a backyard, consider **low fences around clusters of plants, individual tree wraps or tree wraps incorporated with chemical repellents**. Be sure to plan ahead in the event we have a winter with deep



A rabbit fence added to an existing fence.

snow cover — you may have to extend the height of your fences.

Or, consider keeping rabbits out of your entire backyard. A wood privacy fence or chain link fence will not keep rabbits out of your yard. However, **one-inch hardware cloth or hail screen added to the bottom two feet of your existing fencing** creates an effective perimeter fence for your entire yard.

For more options on controlling rabbits in urban and rural settings, see NebGuide (G-1526), “Prevention and Control of Rabbit Damage,” online at ianrpubs.unl.edu/wildlife/g1526.htm or available free at the extension office. This NebGuide describes how to identify rabbit damage and recommends proper methods of control, such as fencing, habitat modification, repellents, trapping and more. (SC)



Wire mesh placed around a tree should be 18 to 20 inches high.



Rabbit damage to young trees. Damage is above ground because rabbits can stand on drifted snow to reach higher bark.