

Mystery "Bites"

Unidentifiable Skin Problems Usually Have Non-Insect Causes

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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 furnace use, lower humidity inside the home and, in some cases, dry skin.

Sometimes people who experience skin itches make their problem worse by using 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 she was being infested.

Unfortunately, the word *bite* implies there is actually a biter doing the biting. But, biting sensations, rashes, skin welts can be caused by common medical conditions, drug use and allergies to food, personal products or environmental allergens. These sensations are so real, afflicted people may even think they are infested with bugs.

Almost all biting arthropods are visible. The only exception would be a mite infestation. There are some mites associated with pet animals and birds, but these mites do not burrow under the skin. Once pets are treated, the problem is solved.

Scabies is a highly infectious mite that burrows under the skin. It is diagnosed and treated by a dermatologist.

Medical conditions. Medical conditions contributing to prickling or itchy skin include

diabetes, autoimmune diseases (lupus), 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. This medical problem must be treated by a physician.

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

Allergies. 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.

Ekbom's Syndrome. Ekbom's Syndrome was first described in 1938. Karl Axel Ekbom, a Swedish neurologist described an unusual situation where a person imagines he is afflicted by a 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 describe bugs 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, Mississippi State Health Department Medical Entomologist, delusory parasitosis sufferers are most likely to be:

- Older and disproportionately female.
- Stressed from some emotional trauma, possibly from post-traumatic stress disorder.
- 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 his problems started after his grown son was disabled 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 or finding ways to become more socially interactive help reduce delusory parasitosis.

Entomologists 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 online at <http://www.ent.uga.edu/publications/delusory.pdf>

Raccoons in the City

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People are sometimes surprised to see raccoons in the city limits. Raccoons are very common in both urban and rural areas where there is suitable habitat. They live in sewer systems, and can easily take advantage of ready-made homes like chimneys and attics. Excluding the animals and removing their food and water sources is the most long-term solution to help avoid raccoon problems. Trapping is only a short-term solution and should be used in combination with exclusion and removing attractants.

Raccoons can easily find food and water. Cat and dog food left outside after dark, improperly stored garbage, poorly maintained compost piles and scraps tossed out to the birds, all provide easy sources of food. Containers

of water for pets left out overnight, uncovered hot tubs, swimming pools and backyard ponds are all frequented by water-loving raccoons.

You can reduce the likelihood of raccoons visiting your property with some changes in habitat and reducing food and water attractants.

With the exception of swimming pools and backyard ponds, all of these possible sources for food and water for the raccoons can be taken care of by proper storage and a little effort and discipline on the part of the property owner. Bring pet food and water in at dusk. Secure garbage cans properly. Metal trash cans are best with tight fitting lids

in case they get knocked over. Learn how to best maintain a compost pile and resist the urge to throw bread and scraps to the birds. Cover hot tubs and swimming pools, if possible.

Make sure chimneys have the proper caps and buildings are maintained properly so raccoons don't have easy access to attics. Raccoons usually gain access to a building by climbing up a nearby tree and using a limb to get to the roof. If you are suspicious a raccoon is accessing your roof from a tree, wrap the trunk of the tree with a material that will show claw marks like plastic trash bag, newspaper, aluminum foil. As the raccoon climbs up the tree, it will tear the material. If a raccoon is using the tree, you can install a band of metal sheeting around the tree. The band should be 2½ feet wide and placed at least two feet above the



Raccoon paw prints in a slow walk pattern. Note the "hand-like" features of the prints.



Raccoon on shingled roof

ground. The raccoons will be able to climb down the tree, but not get back up over the metal band. Always monitor the band so as the tree grows, it isn't constricted by it. You may also have to trim the limb(s) raccoons are using to reach the roof.

Raccoons will also use the corner of buildings to gain access to a roof. If this is the case, tack a three-foot wide metal sheet around the corner of the building. Once the raccoons are excluded, you can make more permanent repairs to the roof and building if needed.

If exclusion efforts fail,



Brown smudge marks and fine scratches on a vertical surface are keys signs of raccoon use.

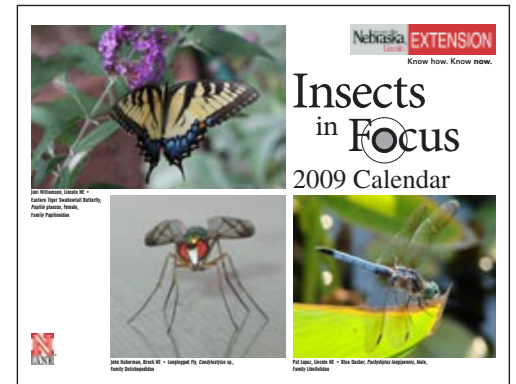
consider hiring a pest control professional to help you trap the animal. Raccoons are best handled by professionals. Some pest control professionals also provide services to safely clean-up raccoon latrines which can harbor dangerous parasites.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

UNL Extension NebGuide G1688 "Controlling Raccoons and Opossums" available at the extension office or online at <http://lancaster.unl.edu/pest>

2009 Wall Calendar

Now available! This calendar celebrates the work of adults and youth who attended the 2008 Insect Photography Workshop presented by University of Nebraska-



Lincoln Extension. Cost is \$11 plus tax at the extension office (\$15 if mailed). For more information, call Barb Ogg or Karen Wedding at 441-7180. Free computer wallpaper and screensaver of these beautiful photos are online at <http://lancaster.unl.edu/pest/Calendar.shtml>

Beginning Beekeeping 2-Day Workshop



presented by UNL Extension Bee Specialist Dr. Marion Ellis

Saturday, Feb. 21, 9 a.m.–5 p.m.
Lancaster Extension Education Center,
444 Cherrycreek Road, Lincoln

You will learn to:

- understand bee biology and behavior to manage bees
- locate hives for best survival and production
- learn about management of honey bee parasites and diseases

Saturday, April 11, 10 a.m.–2 p.m.
Apiculture lab, Agricultural Research and Development Center (ARDC), near Mead

You will gain hands-on training to give you some experience working with bees. You will:

- open a bee hive
- learn to install packaged bees
- assemble a bee hive
- harvest honey and beeswax
- prepare your crop for market

Registration fee: \$20 per person. Registration includes break refreshments, reference materials and lunch. Cost for each additional family member is \$10 and includes refreshments and lunch (family includes parents and siblings living at home). Please pre-register by calling 441-7180.