

Carpet Beetles: Pull the Rug Out From Under Them

[355]

Jody Green
Extension Educator

Carpet beetles belong to the family Dermestidae, which come from the Greek translation “skin” and “to eat,” referring to its larva stage and insatiable appetite for animal hair, feathers, fur and hides. Carpet beetles are one of the most common household pests. Finding a few in your home is nothing to worry about, and not all carpet beetle sightings indicate an infestation.

What Are Signs of Carpet Beetles?

Carpet beetles make their appearance inside homes as fuzzy worms, sometimes seen crawling across the bathroom floor. Like all beetles, they undergo complete metamorphosis characterized by the following stages: egg, larvae, pupae and adult. This is

very important because larval and adult stages vary drastically in terms of appearance, habitat, food source and damage.

Larvae undergo many molts, where they shed their exoskeleton to progress to a larger, more mature larval stage before pupating into an adult. Cast skins may be found in great abundance and serve as a sign for a current or past infestation.

Two main types of carpet beetles found in Nebraska are the varied carpet beetle and black carpet beetle. When adult carpet beetles are found indoors, they are almost always found around window frames trying to get outside.

Where Do They Come From?

Adult beetles live outside and are strong fliers, especially on warm sunny days. They can come inside on clothes, items or pets, and fly through

open doors and windows. They feed on the nectar and pollen from plants and shrubs (spirea is one of their favorites) and may be accidentally brought in with fresh-cut flowers.

What Items Can They Damage?

There are a number of food sources consumed and subsequently damaged by the larval stage. The larvae are known to chew holes and damage the following items:

- Natural fabrics such as wool, linen, silk and cotton.
- Carpet and rugs, clothing and upholstered furniture — especially stained or soiled fabrics.
- Stuffed animals and taxidermy.
- Animal hair, fur, feathers and hide.
- Dried animal products such as dried meat, fishmeal and bow hair from instruments.

Continued on next page



Varied carpet beetle larvae have dense hair on their abdomen and can be up to 1/4" long while adults are 1/16–1/8" long, dome-shaped, with yellow, black, gray and white scales (pictured magnified and approximate size).



Photos: Jody Green, Nebraska Extension in Lancaster County



Black carpet beetle adults are 1/8–1/4" long, oval-shaped, black with short, sparse hairs (pictured magnified and approximate size). Larvae (not shown) can be up to 1/2" long, are tapered and have long tufts of hair at the end of their bodies.

- Dried plant products such as spices, grains, cereals and chocolate.
- Dead insects and spiders, including 4-H collections, light fixtures and glue boards.

What Is Their Effect on Humans?

Neither larvae nor adults bite humans, but their small, spiny hairs can cause health problems in sensitive individuals. These sharp hairs can accumulate over long periods of time and become airborne, coming in contact with skin, eyes, airways and even the digestive tract if foodstuff becomes contaminated.

Symptoms of health problems include hay fever-like symptoms (red, itchy, watery eyes and runny nose), inflammation, itchy skin, localized rash,

systemic hives and gastrointestinal distress. Note: Most people have no reaction to carpet beetles, but in sensitive individuals (i.e. babies, toddlers) once larvae, cast skins and debris are eliminated, symptoms subside.

How Do I Get Rid of Them?

Before grabbing insecticides to combat carpet beetles, consider an integrated approach to pest management, where sanitation, exclusion and non-chemical methods are utilized first. It is important to find the source and discard infested items to contain the spread and prevent future infestations.

- Vacuum spilled foods, lint and pet hair.
- Launder or dry clean bedding, clothes, sheets and blankets.
- Inspect items before storing in air-tight container.

- Remove dead insects, spider webs, bird, rodent, bees and wasp nests.
- Fix or install screens on doors, windows and vents.
- Check flowers for beetles before bringing inside.
- Expose infested items to extreme heat (120°F for 30 minutes) or cold (0°F freezer for 10 to 14 days).

In ongoing cases where the source of the infestation cannot be located, it is advised to hire a professional company to:

- Perform a detailed and invasive investigation of the structure.
- Clean carpets and area rugs.
- Chemically treat with a labeled insecticide or fumigate infested items.

It is important to remember that even the cleanest homes can house a few carpet beetles, so do not panic!