

What “Mite” Be Causing That Bite Under The Old Oak Tree



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Have you any oak trees on your property? Have you been getting unexplained rashes and bites, especially on your neck? Just when you think that you have seen all of the biting pests, now we have a new one. A parasitic mite, *Pyemotes herfsi*, also known as the oak leaf gall mite or itch mite, made its way into the United States sometime in the 1990s – probably from Europe where they were first identified back in the 1930s.

These mites are very small (less than 0.2 millimeters). Frequently, people being bitten by them cannot see the perpetrators, yet they can see and feel the results. Unlike chigger bites, which are often found on legs, the first signs of itch mite attack on humans are red welts on the neck, face, arms and upper torso.

Itch mites have tiny, piercing mouthparts. Though tiny, they are capable of piercing skin and injecting a neurologically active saliva. They usually feed on the larvae of the oak midge. Oak midge larvae are responsible for leaf galls that look like a brownish folded leaf edge, especially on pin oak trees. Once injected with the toxic saliva, insect hosts become immobile and shrivel to a shapeless mass as the mite feeds.

The female itch mite then feeds on the host and swells until she is about 1 millimeter wide.

After about seven days, approximately 250 fully developed mites emerge from her. About 10 percent of them are males who mate with the females so that they can immediately find another host to continue producing more mites.

Enormous numbers of mites can build by late summer. This coincides with their midge larvae hosts finishing their immature life stages and dropping to the ground to pupate into adult midges. This leaves the itch mites without a food source. Now very hungry, they begin searching for substitutes. They will take a bite out of almost anything, people included.

What can you do to reduce your exposure to these bothersome mites? First, know that they aren't going to be a problem every year. However, there will be outbreaks. When these outbreaks do occur, avoid spending time under oak trees. Keep your windows closed, since screens will not stop mites from entering your home. Wear clothing that protects your skin. Exposed skin will garner some protection from insect repellents.

Washing yourself and your clothing shortly after being outside under trees where mite showers are occurring will help as well. Try not to scratch the bites. This can introduce bacteria into the wound and cause a bigger problem in the end.

Currently, there are no pesticides registered for itch mite control in the trees. Δ

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