

Oak Leaf Itch Mite

Background Information

The Oak Leaf Itch Mite (*Pyemotes herfsi*) is thought to have originated from Europe and was first reported in the U.S. in Kansas in 2004. It is closely related to the commonly found Straw Itch Mite (*Pyemotes tritici*), which is found in hay, especially wheat straw hay. The Oak Leaf Itch Mite is invisible to the naked eye, but the females when full of offspring will appear like small beads within the oak leaf gall. They are mostly tan in color and elongated when seen through a microscope. The preferred food sources for the mites are the larvae of gall midges, which are small flies that induce the oak to form marginal galls on the oak leafs. Other food resources that have been documented are cicada immature stages, stored product pests such as beetles, and certain wood boring beetles. It is thought that the Oak Leaf Itch Mite overwinters within the galls of the oak leaves or within leaf litter on the ground. Most of the research demonstrates that the fly midge that the mites are feeding on prefer pin oaks or red oaks. The time for a female mite to initiate feeding on the fly midge until offspring can emerge can be as little as one week and this will enable the mite to become numerous over a short period of time.



Now, with a confirmation of the mite from oak leaf galls, the question is how do we deal with it?

Frequently Asked Questions:

Can people be bitten by itch mites?

Yes. Although the oak leaf gall mite feeds on midge larvae, they can accidentally bite people when looking for food. Mites usually need about four hours on your body before they bite. Once the mite's regular food source is gone from the leaves, usually in late summer, the mites drop from the trees. Oak leaf gall mites are so small that they can float on the wind, and pass through window or door screens and loosely-woven clothing.

How will I know if I have been bitten?

You may develop red welts that look like chigger bites on your neck, face, arms and upper body. These bites are not usually on legs where chigger bites may be found.

The itch mite welts form into a pimple-like lesion after about 12 hours. The bites are very itchy and can be present for up to two weeks.

What should I do if I think I've been bitten?

The most important thing is not to scratch the bites, since scratching can lead to an infection. Try over-the-counter topical anti-itch creams and oral anti-histamines to control itching (e.g. calamine lotion). If the itching is intense, or you develop a skin infection, you should contact your health care provider.

What can I do to prevent being bitten?

If you see brown and crusty edges on oak tree leaves, be aware that mite activity is possible. Don't sit under oak trees or on nearby lawns. If you are in an area where itch mite associated rashes are occurring, or nearby oak trees have brown and crusty edges:

- When weather permits, keep windows shut from August through October when "mite-showers" can occur.
- Remove clothing items each day and launder them. Take a warm, soapy shower after coming indoors, especially after gardening, raking leaves or performing other outdoor activities.

Can I use DEET or other insect repellent?

Since the mites only bite people when they accidentally fall on them, DEET and other insect repellents may not work. However, to prevent being bitten by mosquitoes, which can carry West Nile virus, you should use insect repellents with DEET.

Can itch mites live in my home?

No, in order to survive, itch mites need to feed on insect larvae, which are usually found on the inside of tree leaves.

If the mites come from oak trees, should the trees be sprayed or removed?

No. Since mites feed on insect larvae that are inside the edge of leaves, chemical sprays are not effective. Removal of trees is not necessary because these mites are not likely to be a problem every year.