Declared out of print June 2013.
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MITES IN STORED FOODS

Several species of mites can infest stored food products. They feed on a range of materials, from grain, seeds, flour, cereals, dried fruits, tobacco, sugar, and dry dog food, to molds, paper, and organic debris in bird and other animal nests.

Stored food mites, barely visible to the unaided eye, are opaque white to light tan. They hatch from eggs and develop into adults in 3-4 weeks. High humidity and temperatures of 65° to 75°F are most suitable to mite development. However, mites can survive temperatures near freezing and are generally more prevalent during the colder months.

Mites commonly hide in crevices, but large numbers may appear in food or on open shelving, where they often resemble piles of tan dust. Such piles are composed of living and dead mites, cast mite skins, and feces. Prolonged contact with mites causes a skin irritation called grocer’s itch.

Prevention

Stored food mite infestations may be prevented by keeping stored food in dry, clean areas. Periodically, clean the storage areas, including shelves, cracks, and crevices. Vacuum or wipe up all debris. Increase air circulation to reduce humidity and prevent mold. Mites increase when humidity is high.

If bins or large containers are used for grain or grain products storage, allow the contents to become exhausted, if possible. Frequently such materials are replenished before all contents are used up, and often as not, the replacement material is “dumped” directly on older unused materials. The unused materials become damp and moldy with time, producing an ideal habitat for mite development and reproduction.

One can protect stored foods from any stored products pest, including mites, by placing them in containers with tight-fitting lids. This method also works for dry pet foods that are purchased in bulk and stored for long periods of time. Closely inspect any food materials, such as grains, etc., that are purchased in bulk, to avoid bringing home an already established infestation.
Bailed hay that has been saturated by rain is suspect and should be examined closely. It should not be brought into the barn until it is dry. Wet hay frequently has been the source of large infestations of mold mites. No chemicals are registered for control of such mites on hay in barns.

**Control**

If products become infested, it is important to find the source of infestation and eliminate it. Look for an infested stored food product (especially an opened one unused for a long period of time). Bird nests near the food storage area, mold on a wall, or mold around a leaky pipe can also harbor mites and serve as the source of infestation. In at least one case, the source of infestation was mold growing on the sheetrock surface of the wall void, where a water pipe had been leaking. Sometimes mice will store dog food, seeds, or other food in wall voids, under kickplates of kitchen cupboards, or in other hidden locations. These areas frequently have been the source of infestations.

Foods suspected of harboring an infestation should be either disposed of, heated, or thoroughly frozen, to kill the mites. To heat, place the food in shallow pans in a 140°F oven for 30 minutes. Leave the door open slightly to prevent scorching. Eating foods heavily infested by mites may cause gastrointestinal irritation.

If there is any chance that mites may be in foods that do not seem to be infested — be ruthless, do not take a chance — dispose of them. Remove all foods from the storage area. Place uninfested food in containers with tight-fitting lids. Thoroughly clean and scrub all shelves, moldy areas, etc., with warm water and detergent. Dry the area completely before using chemical sprays registered for this use or before replacing the stored foods.

Treat cracks and crevices with a pesticide registered for that use, to kill hidden mites. Pyrethrum sprays containing piperonyl butoxide are effective against most kinds of stored product mites. Carefully follow all label directions and precautions. Be sure the spray label states that it can be used in the house. Whether spraying cracks or the entire storage area, be careful not to let spray touch food, dishes or cooking utensils.

If you are unable to gain control over a stored mite infestation with these methods, you may want to consider the services of a reputable pest control operator.

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Use pesticides with care. Apply them only to plants, animals or sites listed on the label. When mixing and applying pesticides, follow all label precautions to protect yourself and others around you. It is a violation of the law to disregard label directions. If pesticides are spilled on skin or clothing, remove clothing and wash skin thoroughly. Store pesticides in their original containers and keep them out of the reach of children, pets, and livestock.

By Arthur L. Antonelli, Extension entomologist, and Roy M. Davidson, Jr., Agricultural Research Technologist, WSU Western Washington Research and Extension Center, Puyallup. Issued by Washington State University Cooperative Extension, J.O. Young, Director, and the U.S. Department of Agriculture in furtherance of the Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Cooperative Extension programs and policies comply with federal and state laws and regulations on nondiscrimination regarding race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, and handicap. Trade names have been used to simplify the presentation of information. No endorsement of products is intended. Published January 1985. 25¢