

## What is a straw itch mite?

A straw itch mite (*Pyemotes tritic*), also known as a "hay" or "grain itch mite", measures 1/125 inch long. Straw itch mites commonly breed in stored grain, dried beans and peas, wheat straw, hay and other dried grasses. The mites are actually beneficial because they attack insects that feed on stored grain and similar materials. These mites can cause red, raised itchy bumps on the skin during harvesting and post-harvesting operations or in straw, hay or certain grains.

## What is the life cycle of an itch mite?

The life cycle of this tiny pest is quite interesting. The female, who can be seen only after she has eaten, (the male is undetectable), bites a larva, person or animal, and engorges herself. Utilizing this food, up to 300 eggs in the female's abdomen develop, and within a few days adult mites emerge from the pregnant female. Males breed with newly emerged females. This is the stage at which the mites disperse to colonize new habitats to feed on other insect larvae. But if they land upon hosts such as humans, they will attempt to feed on them with the resulting itchy bites.

## Who is at risk for straw mite bites?

Humans, particularly in grain growing areas, are bitten when handling infested straw, crops (beans, cotton, small grains) or crop residues, or similar materials harboring the mites and those who make dried plant arrangements. People who handle mite-infested materials can be attacked. Straw itch mites can travel through the air, so anyone in these areas can be at risk. When straw itch mites become separated from their insect hosts or their hosts become scarce, itch mites may bite other animals, and humans. A person who is severely infested may have thousands of bites from itch mites that cannot be detected by the naked eye. Fortunately, the mites cannot live on humans and do not remain long. There is no evidence that the bites transmit disease, nor that there is a person-to-person transmission of the mite.

## What are the symptoms of straw mite bites?

Bites produce a rash which includes red welts with a small white pustule (head) at the center. One to several hundred bites can occur on a person or animal. The bite is not felt and can take from two to 24 hours for resulting welts to appear. Severe cases can cause infection, fever, vomiting, and joint pain. Severe itching and possible infection can occur if bites are scratched open. Itching may last up to a week or more. Welts will normally disappear within a few weeks. The bites of straw itch mites are characteristically found on the trunk of the body and on the arms.

## How can you prevent bites from straw itch mites?

To prevent straw itch mite bites, avoid grassy areas and shower with plenty of soap after being in grassy or weedy areas. An insect repellent containing DEET is also another way of preventing the bites. The best control strategy is to eliminate the mite's host insects. If possible, clean storage areas thoroughly and treat with a pesticide, such as cyfluthrin. If necessary, stored commodities can be fumigated to disinfest them. Fumigation should be performed by persons holding the appropriate pesticide applicator's license or certification. Mite populations should decrease or completely disappear with the onset of the first frost. Many people believe the mites infest their beds or homes, but this is not true.

## What is the treatment for straw itch mite bites?

### *Treatment of storage area:*

Treatment is not recommended for most situations unless mites are infesting stored grains or hay barns. Removal of infested grain or fumigation of hay barn may be necessary in severe cases. For further information, contact your state department of agriculture or your local extension office.

### *Treatment in humans:*

In homes where the mite has been brought in on a person's clothing or other carrier (such as pets), the mite will not live more than 24 hours without eating.

Oral antihistamines such as diphenhydramine and topical anti-itch creams such as hydrocortisone have been useful in alleviating the discomfort caused by the bites. In most cases the bites clear in one to two weeks. If you continue to have discomfort, see your physician.

OSDH 02/06

