

DUST MITES -- WHAT AND WHERE

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Several inquiries have come to me recently about dust mites. Interest has been raised on this topic by the news media during the past two years. One prominent local TV station showed a terrifying full screen view of a mite during the evening news and warned people that it could be invading their homes any time now. Several large merchandising companies are advertising special mite proof mattress casings, inescapable vacuum bags, air purifiers and various magical powders to rid your house of dust mites.

What is a dust mite? I have not seen the term used in any of the WSU publications nor can I find it in my entomology reference books. One recent news media organization referred to the dust mite by an unwieldy scientific name Dermatophagoides pteronyssinus. That is very impressive and there is such a mite by that name that might be found in house dust and bird nests, but that is by no means the only one that could be implicated as a dust mite. There are several mites that feed on the dust from grains and other stored food products and could be found in house dust. Why all of the sudden interest in dust mites? Are we suddenly being invaded by a new modern health threat? I really do not think so. The mites that are being referred to as dust mites have been around for hundreds of years and very few people were ever aware of their existence. It is true that organic debris from mite populations can cause allergic reactions in people just as cat hair, mold spores or a hundred other substances found in house dust.

What should we tell clients who ask us about dust mites? We must be realistic and inform them that there are mites almost everywhere, but at the same time, I think we should try to assure them that life goes on in spite of the many micro-organisms we are exposed to every day. It is rarely possible or even feasible to rid our environment of all mites any more than we can eliminate all bacteria from our houses. When a client asks me about some of the gadgets being sold to protect them from mites, I urge them to investigate carefully before spending money for something that may not really do what they are led to believe it will do for them. On the other hand, we must be careful to avoid acaraphobias and if a person feels more comfortable using an advertised product to reduce mites in their house, then maybe it is worth the money spent for it. We must also recognize that there are many allergies that could be a result of mites in house dust. There are qualified physicians who can help solve those problems. Fortunately, fewer than 5% of people are sensitive to mite dust.

At the present time, I do not know of any safe method to completely eradicate mites from a house. Anything that eliminates dust and debris will certainly help to reduce the populations of mites in the house and is certainly better than doing nothing. Gather any information you find on dust mites and it may help as to prepare answers for clients. Mites are microscopic creatures, less than 0.5 mm long and very difficult to identify enough to determine what their habits are. It takes special techniques to mount them properly on a microscope slide and special microscopes beyond anything we have to see enough of their detailed structure to identify them. I am not an acarologist, but I will help you preserve any mite specimens you find, so that we might send them to the proper place to have them identified.