Browntail Rash.

Department of Human Services, Division of Disease Control  207-5301

Maine Forest Service at (207) 287-2431

Since the rash is caused by both a chemical reaction to a toxin in the bristles of the caterpillars, and a physical irritation as the bristles become imbedded in the skin, avoiding direct or indirect contact will prevent the rash. The following precautions are recommended for anyone living in or visiting browntail moth infested areas during the spring or summer:

The cause of “browntail rash” is a toxin associated with short (3-5 mm) stiff hairs or bristles on the caterpillar of the browntail moth, “Euproctis chrysorrhoea.” The caterpillars are active from May through July but the dermatitis is most common in late June and July when the toxins reach their highest concentration in the mature caterpillars. The signs and symptoms of the dermatitis can develop at the time of the exposure or be delayed for several hours. Most individuals developing the dermatitis will do so after outdoor activity which exposes them to trees or shrubs harboring this pest. Severe rashes have developed after contact with clothing which became impregnated with windborne hairs while being dried out-of-doors. The duration of the rash varies from hours to days. Treatment is focused on relieving symptoms and eliminating exposure.

Winter surveys conducted by Maine Forest Service personnel have revealed that the browntail moth has extended its range from a few islands off the coast in the early 1960’s to twenty-five islands in Casco Bay, all coastal towns from Cape Porpoise to Woolwich and scattered locations such as Randolph, Pemaquid and West Gardiner.

In the one year long life cycle of the browntail moth, young caterpillars emerge from their over wintering nests in late May. The caterpillars may reach 1.5 inches in length and are brown with a broken white stripe on each side and conspicuous un-paired red spots on the posterior end of the back. They mature in late June or early July and produce cocoons from which they emerge approximately two weeks later as moths.
Avoid places where trees or shrubs are lacking their leaves as this indicates a heavy infestation of caterpillars.

Take a cool shower and change clothes after any activity that might involve contact with the browntail moth hairs.

Dry laundry inside during June and July to avoid the hairs becoming impregnated in the clothing.

Wear respirator, goggles and coveralls tightly closed at neck, wrists and ankles when entering infested areas on windy days, performing activities that would stir up caterpillar hairs such as mowing, raking, weed whacking or removing pupal webbing from eaves or boats.

Work on damp days or wet down material as moisture helps keep hairs from becoming airborne.

Use caution. Even if the material has been there for a number of years as the toxin is extremely stable.

The information in this fact sheet is adapted from an article written by Mr. Richard Bradbury of the Maine Forest Service for the “Maine Epigram” and from publications from the United States Department of Agriculture and the Maine Department of Conservation.

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