

Straw or Hay Itch Mites

Hay or straw itch mites, *Pyemotes tritici*, in the family Pyemotidae, are tiny (about 0.2 mm long) creatures. They are common parasites of insects infesting dried plant material, particularly grain, dried beans and peas, straw, hay and other dried grasses. As a consequence the mites are actually beneficial because they attack pest insects that feed on stored grain and similar plant materials. However, they also pose a problem for people working with livestock or doing landscaping, because they will bite humans and other animals, causing irritating rashes.

People who handle mite-infested materials are often bitten by the mites. Bites from hay itch mites are typically found on the back, neck and abdomen, particularly around the waist, and on the arms — basically the parts of the body that come in contact with infested materials. These mites do not feed on humans and do not remain on the skin after biting initially. The bites usually result in itchy red lumps resembling flea bites, and it normally takes between 11 and 18 hours for the rash to develop after they bite. The rash is sometimes known as *grocer's itch*.

There is no evidence that these mites transmit any pathogens. However, their bite can lead to severe skin reactions. Hay itch mites inject proteins when they bite and reaction to the bite will depend on sensitivity to the protein. Oral antihistamines and topical anti-itch creams can be used to treat the bites.

The best strategy to control a problem with hay itch mites is to eliminate the infested material or at least the insects the mites are feeding on. This may mean thoroughly cleaning storage areas and treating these areas with a pesticide. If necessary, stored materials can be fumigated to eliminate both the mites and their host insects. Fumigation should only be done by a licensed pest control advisor.



Pyemotes tritici: male *Pyemotes* ; courtesy of Ron Ochoa, USDA-SEL.



A severe case of itch mite bites (© 2001 Darryl Hardie)