

# Oregon State University Extension Urban Entomology Notes

<http://www.ent.orst.edu/urban/home.html>

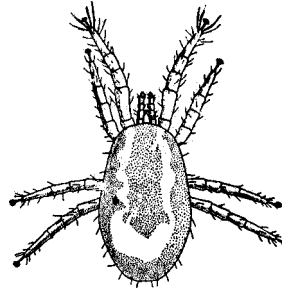
## Mites and Ticks That Bite

F.J. Radovsky, Courtesy Prof.,  
OSU

*biology and control  
information for grow-  
ers & homeowners*

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Northern fowl mite, 1/32 inch long

- Bird & fowl mites
- Rat mites
- House dust mites
- Stored product mites
- Grain-itch mites
- Scabies mites
- Chiggers
- Follicle mites
- Soft ticks
- Hard ticks

Mites and ticks both belong to the same group of spider relatives called the Acari. They have a sac-like body and four pairs of legs (three pairs in the larval stage). Mites are very small; when visible at all to the unaided eye, they appear only as specks moving against a contrasting background. Ticks are somewhat larger, about 1/16 to 1/4 inch long when unfed. Not all of the mites discussed here actually bite, but all of them affect human health in one way or another.

■ **Bird mites and fowl mites.** Some mites parasitic on wild birds and domestic fowl (often the same species found on both) may attack humans and produce an intensely itchy rash, the individual spots may be tipped with a tiny clear blister. These mites disperse out of bird nests during the late spring and summer months, usually after the young birds have left. The mites may be visible as many dots, moving across walls near windows or at other openings to the outside. Remove vacant bird nests near the house and cut back tree limbs that touch the sides of the house. Move chicken coops well away from human houses.

■ **Rat mites.** A mite found on rats and in their nests can produce a rash like that from bird mites. When controlling rats in a building, whether a home, factory, or storage center, first destroy any nests that may be present. Otherwise, the nests of rats that have been trapped or poisoned may be the source of mites, which having been left without their hosts.

- **House dust mites.** These tiny mites do not bite but may cause a hayfever-like allergic reaction, leading to asthma in severe cases. The primary breeding places in houses include mattresses, stuffed furniture, and carpeting. Medical diagnosis of a specific allergy to these mites will indicate whether a control program to reduce mite numbers is needed. House dust contains allergens other than mites, and diagnosis of a reaction to any of these substances indicates the need to reduce dust.
  
- **Stored product mites.** Individuals handling grain, dried fruit, or hay for animal feed may develop a rash and/or respiratory symptoms caused by mites that breed in stored products that have become moldy. Dry out the material through better ventilation or temperature control. This will help eliminate the mold and reduce the allergy-causing mites.
  
- **Grain-itch mites.** This mite is actually a parasite of grain moths, weevils, or other insects infesting stored grain. It may be present in huge numbers in heavily infested grain. It will attempt to feed on humans who handle the grain. Bites produce a severe, itchy rash.
  
- **Scabies mite.** This parasite burrows into human skin and produces a persistent, intensely itchy rash often in the form of grayish lines. Diagnosis is usually made by a physician and may require a superficial skin scraping to reveal the mite. Transmission of these delicate mites requires close contact between individuals. The strain of scabies mite specific to dogs (causing one kind of mange) occasionally is transmitted from pet to human. Curing the infestation on the pet will eliminate this source of mites.
  
- **Chiggers.** These mites are parasitic only as larvae. They occur outdoors in certain habitats. Many pest species are present in grassy areas, scrub, and forest edges, or roads through forest (rather than the deep forest itself); hence such common names as harvest mites and scrub itch. Chiggers feed on skin tissue over a period of several days. They tend to settle in areas of constricted clothing, such as the top of socks and the belt line. The bites become intensely itchy, typically starting a day or two after contact begins. Scratching aggravates the itching and produces sores that may become sites of secondary bacterial infection. Over-the-counter ointments will reduce itching from chigger bites. Bites can be largely avoided by putting pant legs into boots and using repellents containing DEET on skin.
  
- **Follicle mites.** These very common mites are parasitic on humans but cause little harm and usually go unnoticed. A large part of the population (often well over 50%) have mites of two kinds, one in the hair follicles and one in the oil glands associated with the follicles, particularly on the face, scalp, and chest. They are not associated with disease nor do they cause itching or other skin ailments. Under unusual circumstances they may cause inflamed eyelids and loosening of the eyelashes.

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■ **Soft ticks.** These leathery-skinned, blood-sucking parasites are most often encountered in natural areas, associated with rodent nests, sea bird colonies, bat caves, and deer bedding areas, among others. Because rodents sometimes nest in cabins, ticks may be common there as well. Some soft ticks transmit disease and others have a bite that is so severe as to be called toxic. They all engorge in a short time — a matter of minutes. Care should be taken to avoid these ticks in the areas where they occur. Ticks should be removed from you and your pets immediately when found (see below).

■ **Hard ticks.** These are the ticks that most people encounter, during the warm months of the year. They are called “hard” because some or all of the back is covered by a stiff shield. Each life stages climbs onto vegetation such as tall grass and waits for a host animal to brush by. Once on the host, the tick fixes its mouthparts firmly in the skin and will engorge (fill with blood) over several days to a week before detaching. Hard ticks transmit a number of diseases (for example, Lyme disease, Rocky Mountain spotted fever) and may also cause a toxic reaction.

**Remove ticks as soon as possible.** To remove a tick, use a constant steady force to pull it straight out from the skin, grasping the tick either with tweezers or a piece of tissue paper over the fingers. Avoid breaking off the mouthparts in the skin (which may cause secondary infection) but the important thing is to remove the tick immediately. Other methods of tick removal, including twisting (“unscrewing”), heating, and covering with oil or wax, are not recommended. The same methods of sealing off clothing and using repellents mentioned above for chiggers are also effective in preventing tick attachment.