

Don't Immediately Assume That There Are No Pests

When a customer complains of bites from insects that can't be seen, you might immediately suspect delusory parasitosis. Sometimes you're right, but sometimes you can be wrong if you don't first conduct an inspection. Delusory parasitosis is a psychological condition in which the person believes that bugs or parasites are crawling, biting, or burrowing into and out of his or her body. Nine out of ten times, the "bites" turn out to be something else, usually a combination of environmental conditions and physical factors that cause skin irritation that mimic bug bites perfectly, often complete with bumps and swellings. *But one out of ten times, actual pests are the cause.*

Ask the customer to collect specimens of the biting pest by either picking up the pest on a wet cotton ball and dropping it in a jar of rubbing alcohol, or using a piece of Scotch tape to gently stick the bug and tape onto a piece of paper. You can leave sticky traps in the rooms where the customer complains of bites. Collect dead insects and mites from window sills, table tops, and other areas and place them in a sealed plastic bag for identification.

Consider bird or rodent mites - When young birds leave the nest, mites that have been feeding on the birds will migrate looking for a new host. Similarly, mites can migrate out of mouse or rat nests. Ask the customer about nearby bird nests, especially nests under eaves, in vents, in air conditioning units, or near windows.

Consider bed bugs - Check the bed, especially if the customer complains of bites during the night or found first thing in the morning. Make sure you have done a thorough inspection around the headboard, mattress and box spring to rule out bed bugs.

Consider fleas - Ask the customer about pets and whether they have been treated for fleas. Check pet resting and sleeping areas. In rare cases, even in homes without pets, fleas can result from wild animals in crawl spaces or from pets that were visiting.

Consider chiggers and other outdoor pests - During warm weather, people work or play outside in areas where chiggers occur. Chigger bites, and even mosquito bites, often don't become apparent until a day or two after the bite so people may not associate the bite with the circumstances. Question your customer about outdoor activities in chigger-prone areas.

Consider environmental conditions - Check the humidity level. In winter, especially, dry air and static electricity combine to cause carpet fibers, paper splinters or fiberglass fibers to "jump" onto arms and legs. The particles can feel like pinpricks or bites, especially when combined with already dry skin. Simply using a humidifier, along with moisturizing skin lotions, can make a big difference.

Other pests that can cause "bites" and irritation are lice and human itch mites (scabies). These, however, are personal medical (not pest control) conditions and need to be addressed by a physician.