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PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

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Subject: Health Risks from Browntail Moths
Date / Time: Thursday, May 2, 2024, at 11:15AM
Pages: 2
Priority: Normal
Message ID: 2024PHADV012

Health Risks from Browntail Moths

Background: The browntail moth is an invasive species of both forest and human health concern. Maine is the only state in the U.S. currently experiencing widespread problems with this moth. The microscopic hairs found on browntail moth caterpillars, shed skins, and cocoons can cause skin reactions and breathing problems. Providers should be aware of the risk of browntail moth hairs, and the public should know what they can do to help reduce exposure to browntail moth caterpillar hairs. Browntail moth caterpillars are hairy, dark brown caterpillars with two red-orange dots on the back. Older caterpillars have two white stripes running from head to tail.

Symptoms: Most individuals affected by the hairs develop a localized rash similar to poison ivy that will last for a few hours up to several days. In more sensitive individuals, the rash can be severe and last for weeks. Dislodged hairs can become airborne and cause trouble breathing, including respiratory distress, if inhaled. Symptoms result from both a chemical reaction to a toxin in the hairs and a physical irritation as the barbed hairs become embedded in the skin and airways.

Seasonality: Caterpillars are active from April to early July. Hairs from caterpillars, shed skins, and cocoons can become airborne and settle on vegetation and other surfaces. They can be stirred up during mowing, raking, sweeping, and other outdoor activities. Hairs remain toxic for 1-3 years in the environment but lose their toxicity over time.



Browntail moth winter web with basking caterpillars (left), caterpillars (center) & cocoons (right)

Maine summary: The Maine Forest Service surveys indicate that most areas of Maine that have significant host tree populations are at some risk for browntail moth infestation. Preferred host trees include apple, birch, cherry, crabapple, oak, pear as well as other hardwoods. Every county in Maine has had at least some browntail moth webs or caterpillars detected in them since 2022. In 2023, notable higher populations were seen in Cumberland, Hancock, Knox, Penobscot, and Waldo counties.

Even in areas with browntail moth management, the risk to the public remains high due to the persistent nature of the hairs. Visit the [Interactive Browntail Moth Dashboard](#) to see where the Maine Forest Service has noted significant browntail moth activity in recent years. People may experience impacts even in areas with low or undetected populations of browntail moths. Visit our browntail moth communications partners' [Knock Out Browntail pages](#) hosted by the Department of Agriculture, Conservation and Forestry for information on the recognition, management, and mitigation of browntail moth impacts.

Information for providers:

- Be aware of the risk of browntail moth hairs, particularly in areas with known populations.
- There is no specific treatment for dermatitis due to browntail moths; treatment is focused on relieving symptoms and eliminating ongoing exposure.
- Mild rashes may be treated with calamine or caladryl lotion, hydrocortisone cream, or taking a cool bath with Aveeno Oatmeal. or baking soda. Severe reactions may require prescription medication.
- The toxin in the hairs is extremely stable and can remain a hazard for years.

Recommendations to reduce exposure:

- Avoid places heavily infested by caterpillars.
- Take cool showers and change clothes after any activity that may expose you to browntail moth hairs.
- Dry laundry inside during June and July to avoid having the hairs embedded in clothing.
- Wear a respirator, goggles, and coveralls tightly closed at the neck, wrists, and ankles when performing activities that stir up caterpillar hairs such as mowing, raking, weed whacking, and removing pupal webbing.
 - Perform these tasks on damp days or spray down vegetation with a hose. The moisture helps keep the hairs from becoming airborne while working.

For more information:

- Contact 211 Maine for answers to frequently asked questions on browntail moths:
 - Dial 211 (or 207-874-2211)
 - Text your zip code to 898-211
- Maine CDC Browntail Moth Webpage: www.maine.gov/dhhs/browntailmoth
- Maine Department of Agriculture Conservation and Forestry Browntail Moth Webpage: www.maine.gov/dacf/knockoutbtm