



Department of Health and Human Services
Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention
286 Water Street
11 State House Station
Augusta, Maine 04333-0011
Tel: (207) 287-8016; Fax (207) 287-9058
TTY Users: Dial 711 (Maine Relay)

Maine Health Alert Network (HAN) System

PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

To: All HAN recipients
From: Siiri Bennett, State Epidemiologist, Maine CDC
Allison Kanoti, State Entomologist, Maine Forest Service
Subject: Health Risks from Browntail Moths
Date / Time: Wednesday, April 28, 2021 at 2:00PM
Pages: 3
Priority: Normal
Message ID: 2021PHADV007

Health Risks from Browntail Moths

Background: The browntail moth is an invasive species of both forest and human health concern. Maine and Massachusetts are the only states in the U.S. experiencing problems with this moth. The microscopic hairs found on browntail moth caterpillars, shed skins, and cocoons can cause skin reactions and breathing problems.

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. 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, cast skins, and pupae 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.

Providers should be aware of the risk of browntail moth rashes, and the general public should know what they can do to help reduce exposure to the browntail moth caterpillar hairs.

Browntail moth caterpillars are easy to identify. They are dark brown in color with white stripes along the sides and two red-orange dots on the back. Younger caterpillars lack these white stripes.

Browntail moth young caterpillars (left), older caterpillar (center) & cocoons (right):



Photos courtesy of the Maine Forest Service

Maine summary: The Maine Forest Service surveys indicate that populations of browntail moths are high or very high in **parts of Androscoggin, Cumberland, Hancock, Lincoln, Kennebec, Knox, Sagadahoc, and Waldo Counties**. Other areas may be similarly affected or may have populations approaching high levels. People may experience impacts even in areas with low or undetected populations of browntail moths. In interviews conducted as part of a defoliation prediction study by Maine Forest Service, people reported having experienced a rash attributed to the caterpillar in places with very low populations of browntail moth.

Browntail moth control may be occurring in some areas, but the risk to the public remains high in affected areas due to the persistent nature of the hairs.

Information for providers:

- Be aware of the risk of browntail moth rashes, 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.
- The toxin is extremely stable and can remain a hazard for a long time.

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 from eaves and boats.
 - 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 Forest Service Browntail Moth Webpage: www.maine.gov/dacf/mfs/forest_health/invasive_threats/browntail_moth_info.htm

