

Oak Processionary Caterpillar



PUBLIC HEALTH COMMAND REGION – EUROPE

FACT SHEET EUROPE

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WHAT IS THE OAK PROCESSIONARY CATERPILLAR AND WHERE IS IT FOUND?

The Oak Processionary Caterpillar (OPC) is a moth whose caterpillars develop in oak trees. They can cause significant health problems. Their setae (hairs) contain a toxin that may cause a rash or, if inhaled, asthma. The moths are widely distributed in central and southern Europe. They can be found as far north as Sweden.

HOW DO PEOPLE COME INTO CONTACT WITH THE TOXIC SETAE?

The setae of the 3rd to 6th instar caterpillar readily break off and become airborne. Once airborne, the setae can come in direct contact with the skin or be inhaled. A full grown caterpillar can have around 800,000 stinging hairs. Abandoned nests can also be a problem. They contain shed skins and vast numbers of detached setae and should be treated with extreme caution.



A communal nest containing hundreds of larvae located high in an Oak Tree



WHERE DO I FIND THE OAK PROCESSIONARY CATERPILLAR?

The caterpillars live in oak trees and feed in groups. When not feeding, they congregate in communal nests made of silk webbing spun up under a branch or on the trunk. The larvae molt inside these nests allowing thousands of setae to collect. The caterpillars can be found actively feeding from April to June.

HOW DO I AVOID THE CATERPILLAR HAIRS?

- Do not touch caterpillars or nests.
- Do not try to remove nests by yourself. Call your local Pest Control shop.
- Do not play/picnic/walk under oak trees during peak infestation months (May-July).
- Do not wear short-sleeved clothing in the woods or walk in the under wood.
- When participating in outdoor activities, wear long sleeved clothing and a hat.
- Keep children away from caterpillars and nests.
- If you get exposed to the oak caterpillar hairs, take a shower and wash your clothes immediately.
- Consult a physician in case severe symptoms develop.



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WHAT DOES THE RASH LOOK LIKE?

The rash may consist of flat discolorations or raised bumps on the skin. If the caterpillar hairs come in contact with eyes or mouth a person may develop conjunctivitis (red eyes, sticky discharge, and inflammation of the eye) and/or irritation to the throat/airway. Itching typically begins 2-12 hours after exposure and the rash may be widely spread over the entire body.



Rash after exposure to the Oak Processionary Caterpillar setae

CAN INFESTATIONS BE TREATED?

OPC infestations touch on two categories of pest control, public health and plant protection. When OPC become a recurring problem in or near housing areas, offices, community facilities and public greens like parks and playgrounds, Directorate of Public Works may already have a pest control contract in place. When the problem is located mainly in other forested areas where public access is limited, it will normally be left untreated in Germany. However, as OPC problems are expanding, HN forestry managers may revise this policy.

If OPC is being treated, the treatment approach will normally consist of two parts: Infested trees will be treated chemically in a narrow time window end of April to beginning of May (to hit the 1st and 2nd instar larvae before they develop the poisonous setae). Later, treatments can only consist of a mechanical removal of the silken cocoons with the caterpillars and their shed setae. To prevent the accumulated setae from becoming airborne, operators will use special vacuum equipment and must wear fully sealed personal protection gear.



Individual nest treatment requires heavy equipment and can be very time consuming.



Vacuum removal of OPC uses special equipment and full personal protective gear