



PROTECT YOUR CLOTHING FROM INSECTS

"I just received my garment back from the drycleaners and there are small holes in it. The cleaner tells me the holes were caused by insects feeding on the fabric; yet, I am not aware of any insects in my home. How did this happen?"

This scenario is repeated all too often by consumers.

Most of us think of the clothes moth as the only insect that could possibly cause damage to a wool garment. However, it is also known that other insects do cause fabric damage and will eat other fabrics besides wool.

There are two species of clothes moths and four species of carpet beetles that are commonly found in homes. The clothes moth, the webbing clothes moth, and the casement clothes moth look very much alike. The adult moths are yellowish or buff and have a wing span of about a half inch. Fully grown larvae are white and have brownish, black heads; they are about a half inch long.

Adult black carpet beetles have solid black bodies and brownish legs. They vary in length from about 3/36 to 1/8 inch. The larvae are yellowish or golden or dark brown and the bodies are tapered from the head to the posterior. Adults of the other three species of carpet beetles (the carpet beetle, the furniture carpet beetle, and the varied carpet beetle) have molted colorings of white, brown, yellow, or black; they are about 1/8 inch long. The larvae are elongated and oval; they have brownish or black bristles and grow to be 1/4 inch long.

Female moths or carpet beetles lay soft, white eggs in clothing, household furniture, cracks in the floor, and other concealed places. Female moths lay 100 to 300 eggs which hatch in four to eight days in the summer. Female beetles lay about 100 eggs which hatch in eight to fifteen days in the summer. Hatching usually takes longer in cool weather. Under normal conditions in the home, the black carpet beetle has one generation a year; other carpet beetles and clothes moths have up to four generations a year.

It is not the adult insect, but the larvae of the clothes moths and carpet beetles that eat the fabric. This starts as soon as eggs hatch. Larvae like feeding on wool, mohair, hair, bristles, fur, feathers, and down. But they have been known to attack just about anything from curtains to a mattress.

Clothes moth larvae usually are found on their food material. Carpet beetle larvae may crawl from place to place and be found on any fabric where they find something to eat, mainly food. They can live behind baseboards and moldings, cracks in the floor or corners, or in air ducts of a heating system, as well as closets, shelves, and dresser drawers.

Adult clothes moths prefer darkness, and do not flit about lights; but they may be seen flying lazily in darkened corners, or at the edge of a circle of light. When an object on which they are resting is suddenly moved, they run or fly to conceal themselves. Adult carpet beetles fly readily; they are attracted to sunlight, and sometimes are found on window sills.

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Eggs and larvae of the moths and beetles may be carried into home on articles containing wool or other animal fibers. They could enter the home on second-hand clothing, upholstered furniture, or other materials. Once they are in the home, they can travel from one home to another.

Other insects such as silverfish, crickets, beetles, and roaches will also eat fabrics. In almost all cases, these insects are attracted to the fabric by food or beverage spillage, perspiration, or starched fabrics. While eating on any of these substances, they will naturally eat the fabric that it is attached to. This usually results in the cutting or eating of only the surface yarns. However, it may not be that noticeable. When the article is later cleaned or washed, which makes the damage more apparent. Very often the trail of the damage will be identical to the spill of the food or beverage.

In the case of a napped fabric, insects may only eat the nap that contains the staining substance and not the base fabric. One of the most effective methods of avoiding this damage is to make sure clothing is clean, especially before it is stored. Everything that is stored should be either washed or cleaned. This will ensure the killing of any eggs that are on the fabric. The article should then be stored in an airtight container. Very often, mothballs or other materials are included in the airtight container. These materials should not be allowed to come in direct contact with the fabric, in some cases, they could cause a color change. The scent given off by these materials will not kill the insects, unless it is an extremely high concentration. However, the scent given off is offensive to insects, so they tend to stay away.

If a consumer finds an infestation of an insect, it is important that everything in the drawer, closet, or other container be removed and washed or drycleaned to kill any eggs or larvae on it. It is then necessary to clean every crack and corner of the container. A vacuum cleaner can be beneficial, as well as spraying an area with any appropriate insecticide available at the local market.

The use of a cedar chest is a good method of protecting clean garments. Be sure it is airtight before you place articles in the chest and make sure only clean articles are put in and the door is kept closed. It is beneficial to scatter some type of moth crystals, flakes or balls in the container that will also help repel any insect that may be in that area.

Source: *Clothing Care Gazette* A publication for the consumer advisor. November 1991, International Fabricare Institute, Silver Spring, MD

Additional update:

In the mid-to late 1990's Johnson Wax, the maker of Off!® insect sprays and repellents, began marketing an Off!® “Moth Proofer” for clothing storage. The hanger-type cardboard package contains two units that can be pulled apart/separated. Each hanger contains a “Fresh Scent” packet of gel. The product directions state to “slowly remove foil label from the cartridge using peel tab. Do not remove or puncture clear film protecting color gel.” “This product can be placed inside drawers and storage boxes or hung in closets. Use one unit in smaller closets, drawers or boxes; two in larger closets, drawers, or boxes. For maximum effectiveness, closets, drawers or boxes must be kept as airtight as possible. Dryclean garments before storing.” This product was recommended for wool products by educational representatives from Pendleton Woolen Mill at an AAFC (American Association of Family & Consumer Sciences) national meeting workshop (June 1997). Off!® Moth Proofer is relatively inexpensive and can be purchased at many local supermarkets as well as Walmart, Target and similar retailers.

One advantage of this product over moth balls is the scent. In addition, this product does not have to be positioned so that it does not come in contact with the clothing. LMH

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