

Paper Mites

DO THEY EXIST?

What are paper mites?

Paper mites are an office myth. They do not exist. The paper mite, along with the paper flea, carpet mite and carpet lice, are terms that are often used to describe the culprit that leaves people feeling they have been bitten resulting in itchy, red insect bite-like welts. These annoying symptoms can mislead workers into believing the office is infested. As a result, unnecessary and harmful pesticide applications are ordered by management.

The cause of the red itchy welts, most often, are tiny air-borne particles in small areas such as offices or conference rooms. These particles can cause reactions to susceptible individuals' skin while others may feel no effect. A few of the many particles that could be responsible for the reactions are:

- Fiberglass particles from insulation of vents, ceilings, and walls.
- Fibers from new or worn carpeting.
- Tiny shards of paper resulting from tearing or ripping paper along tear- lines.
- Excess dust in an area can lead to health problems and can trigger certain allergies.

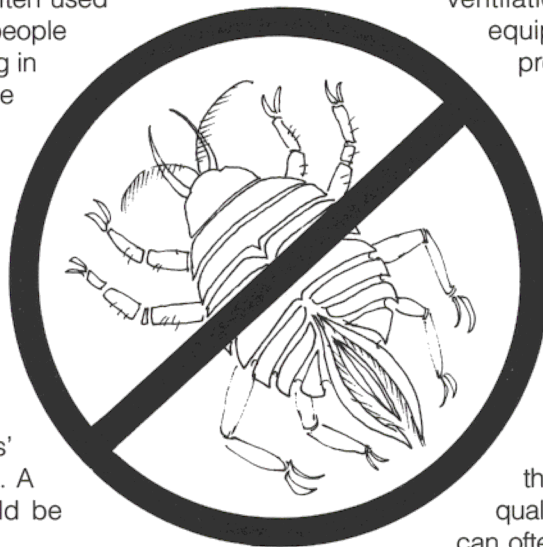
How do you fix the problem?

Start by ruling out insect infestation. Populations of insects that can cause these types of symptoms are usually visible to the naked eye. An experienced and licensed pesticide application should be brought into the workplace to investigate suspect infestation. Do not confuse insects such as fruit flies, which would not be the cause, with anything that could be. Avoid using pesticides such as foggers and sprays when not necessary since they can have lasting, harmful effects.

Poor housekeeping can also lead to dusty conditions and accumulations of harmful particles. This dust can be

disturbed by such activities as moving furniture, renovating, moving old files or turning on the ventilation system. During these times there could be a high number of air-borne particles that could cause workers to suffer numerous reactions. Regular cleaning of the area and/or ventilation system with a HEPA filter-equipped vacuum could eliminate the problem.

Finally, make sure the area has a sufficient supply of fresh air. Stagnant air allows particles to settle and accumulate, only to be kicked up later. Humidity can also have a negative effect on individuals. During the winter months, the heating of the air leads to lower levels of humidity which can cause dry skin. The result of which is an increased sensitivity to certain particles. If you determine that air quality is the cause, you can request an indoor air quality (IAQ) inspection. An IAQ inspection can often help with verifying and pin-pointing the problem as well as recommending solutions.



What can I do for immediate relief?

Some people are more affected by these problems than others. It is important to keep this in mind when dealing with people who may or may not recognize that there is a problem.

If you believe that you suffer from this problem, you should notify your shop steward or union representative. They can help in identifying the cause. While the problem is being addressed, you could do the following:

1. Use a moisturizer for your skin. This will help alleviate symptoms.
2. Request to have the area cleaned using a HEPA equipped vacuum and on a more frequent basis.
3. A humidifier can help improve air quality, but must be carefully maintained according to manufacturers directions.
4. An air purifier can help reduce the number of harmful particles in the air, but is only a temporary solution.

**For more information on any of these issues,
please contact the DC 37 Safety and Health Unit at 212-815-1685.**