Bugs and other things that make you itch

Sources: Jonathan Larson and Zachary DeVries, UK entomologists

People generally don’t like bugs. In fairness, this feeling isn’t without cause. Throughout history, we have consistently dealt with insects and their relatives that like to use us as a food source. Phrases like “sleep tight, don’t let the bed bugs bite” are rooted in a time when we had to worry about being bitten by insects even while we slept. As a result, our bodies and minds are wired to be on the lookout for pests that want to bite us. Sometimes, though, the cause of an itch isn’t a bug at all. Here is a sampling of pests and other conditions that cause itches.

Bed bugs: As the name implies, these pests will take up residence in your bed or any other areas where you sleep or spend considerable amounts of time. They are relatively quick feeders, only taking 5-10 minutes for a meal before disappearing into nearby cracks and crevices. Everyone reacts differently to a bed bug bite, but the most common reaction is an itchy raised bump that resembles a mosquito bite. You can learn more about bed bugs through the University of Kentucky Entfact 636 which is available online at <https://entomology.ca.uky.edu/ef636>. If you suspect you have a bed bug infestation, contact a pest control professional.

Fleas: These tiny, blood suckers often end up in homes after hitching a ride on pets. The adults are the ones responsible for the itchy bites that can appear on people and pets. Adult fleas are amazing jumpers and live on their host. But they have a hard time sticking to humans, because we don’t have enough hair. Often, the larvae live in animal bedding and feed on the feces of their parents.

Lice: Humans can encounter head, body and pubic lice. Head lice are the most common and are the ones that people often think of, especially with school-age children. Lice have modified legs that help them hang on to human hairs, where they live and feed. They do not fly, jump or do a lot of crawling in the environment.

Mosquitoes: Mosquitoes are not normally an issue in the winter months, but the females will land on humans in the summer to take a blood meal. Their saliva usually induces an itchy red welt on the skin. Larvae live in water and don’t feed on humans.

Chiggers: Another classic summer foe, chiggers are immature mites that will partially digest skin cells and slurp them up for nutrition. They do not burrow into the skin but do insert a long tube into our bodies. Their digestive enzymes and tube can induce a maddening itch.

Scabies: Unlike chiggers, scabies mites actually live inside of the body. Scabies can induce pimple-like pustules on the skin and may leave behind noticeable “tunnels” in the skin when a person has an infestation. Scabies tend to be transmitted by long-term skin contact and can be transmitted between family members or sexual partners. Only a dermatologist can help you identify and treat a scabies problem. Most entomologists or county extension agents will not have a powerful enough microscope to identify them.

Invisible Itches: Sometimes people may experience sensations that feel like insects crawling on them or that something is biting them, but they find no evidence of pests. These “invisible itches” can be very tricky. Sometimes people may be dealing with transient issues involving insects like thrips that can prod the skin or even problems with fowl mites that have left a recently abandoned bird nest. You might be dealing with sensations that resemble a bug problem but are actually caused by something else. This time of year, one primary cause of invisible itches is dry skin. In addition, some medications can produce side effects that mirror the sensations of insects, as can problems with unmanaged diabetes, lupus or arthritis, among others. In other cases, homes can become contaminated with irritants like fiberglass or paper shards. Chemicals can also cause irritation similar to a bug bite. It is important to keep an open mind when you experience these kinds of symptoms and to consider other possible sources that don’t have six or more legs.

If your skin itches, it is best to consult your dermatologist or primary care provider. Home remedies such as topical anti-inch creams, oatmeal baths, witch hazel and over-the-counter allergy medications may provide some relief.

More information on bug identification is available at (COUNTY NAME) office of the University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service.

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