

Fabric Pests

Carpet beetles and clothes moths are the most common pests of fabrics. Adult carpet beetles and clothes moths do not damage fabrics. They feed outdoors on pollen or not at all. It is the larva or immature stage of these insects that causes damage to fabrics, fur, feathers or virtually anything made of animal fibers. The adults fly and some are attracted to lights and windows, so they may be more conspicuous in homes than the larvae. The adult female lays eggs in woolen goods, cracks and other concealed places.

Carpet Beetles



Carpet beetle

Immature carpet beetles feed on dried animal products like wool, felt, hair, fur, feathers, dead animals, stuffed trophy heads, etc. They do not feed on clean synthetic or man-made fabrics but they can be found feeding in wool-synthetic blends or on synthetic fabrics stained with urine or sweat. Carpet beetle larvae are repelled by light and tend to burrow deep down into wool, upholstery, or other materials to feed.

Carpet beetle larvae can crawl from place to place but are usually found in concealed locations along baseboards, under large pieces of furniture, or in little-used drawers or storage areas. These larvae are oval to cigar-shaped and densely covered with yellow-orange or light-brown hairs. To grow they molt or shed their skins. In heavy infestations, these light-colored shed skins may be seen in the infested material.

There are several different types of carpet beetles that may be found in homes, but the two most common in this area are the varied carpet beetle and the black carpet beetle.

The varied carpet beetle adult is small (2-3 mm), oval to round, with splotches of white, yellow, and black on its back. To the naked eye, it appears to have a gray calico pattern. The larva is tear-drop shaped and is covered with rows of light brown hairs.

The varied carpet beetle larva is primarily a scavenger. It often goes unnoticed behind furniture or along baseboards where it feeds on such things as accumulated lint, pet hair, food crumbs, dead insects and other organic debris.

The black carpet beetle adult is larger, a solid dark brown or dull black color, and more elongate oval than the varied carpet beetle. The black carpet beetle larva is 3-7 mm long and carrot shaped. It is covered with golden brown hairs and has a characteristic "tail" of long hairs at the rear end.

Clothes Moths



Clothes moth larva

Clothes moths are usually not as common in homes in Maryland as are carpet beetles. Frequently people mistake the more common grain or flour infesting moths for clothes moths.

The primary food of clothes moths larvae is soiled woolens. They cannot complete development on clean wool since they require certain vitamins present only in stained or soiled fabrics.

Both the casemaking and the webbing clothes moths occur in Maryland. The adults of both are tiny (1/2 inch wingspan), yellowish, with narrow wings fringed with long hairs. The larvae are small, white caterpillars with brown heads. They feed on the

surface of the material infested. The casemaking clothes moth larva is rarely seen, however, since it constructs a cylindrical case of fabric which it carries around to hide and feed in. The color of the threads in the larva's case will help to locate the infested material. The webbing clothes moth larva does not live inside a case but instead spins silk tubes over the feeding surface and often hides and feeds in these attached tubes.



*Casemaking
moth larva*



*Webbing
moth*

Control

The most effective control measure is prevention. Clean, properly stored woolens are not attractive to fabric pests. Dry cleaning alone will kill all stages of clothes moths and carpet beetles, but gives no protection against reinfestation. Hand washing with a mild soap for woolens should also kill the insects. Woolen articles should be cleaned and stored in sealed boxes. Cedar chests, blocks, or closets also provide protection. The clothes must be cleaned before storing in the cedar as well. Old clothes, blankets, furs, etc. no longer in use and stored for long periods of time may harbor infestations of carpet beetles, clothes moths, or both. They should be periodically inspected and protected or removed. Moth balls or flakes should be used as a last resort and only in sealed containers. Use only moth balls or flakes containing naphthalene. Naphthalene works as a fumigant to kill the insects. It is not effective as a repellent. Naphthalene vapors can produce toxic reactions in sensitive

individuals. Avoid the use of moth balls or flakes made of paradichlorobenzene, or PDB. Paradichlorobenzene is more toxic than naphthalene and has been implicated as a human carcinogen (cancer causing agent).

Clean susceptible areas in your home often to prevent lint and hair from accumulating. Give close attention to: woolen rugs and carpets, wool wall hangings and tapestries, upholstered furniture with wool, hair, or down stuffing, closets, particularly those in which woolens or furs are kept, surfaces behind radiators and heavy furniture, corners, cracks, baseboards, moldings, and other hard-to-reach areas. The vacuum cleaner is your best tool for most of this cleaning. After using it, dispose of the bag contents promptly; they may include eggs, larvae, or adult insects. In addition to cleaning woolen rugs and carpets frequently, it is advisable to rotate them occasionally.

If the infestation is extensive, chemical spot treatment may be necessary. Use an insecticide registered for this purpose. Apply the insecticide along cracks and crevices, in corners, along baseboards, and moldings, in closets (with clothes removed), and along carpet edges. FOLLOW LABEL DIRECTIONS CAREFULLY. Do not use insecticides on clothing or furniture. Furniture and other furnishings may be protected with other ready-to-use pressurized insecticides recommended for this purpose. Insecticides that are not labeled may damage carpeting or fabrics.

Adapted from:
Carpet Beetles & Clothes Moths, Entomology Leaflet # 80, by Sandra Craft, Department of Entomology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742 (1981).

References:
Olkowski, W., S. Daar, and H. Olkowski. 1991. Common-Sense Pest Control. Newtown, CT: The Taunton Press. 715pp.

USE INSECTICIDES WITH CARE. READ THE LABEL DIRECTIONS. FOLLOW ALL SAFETY PRECAUTIONS.

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