



## “Itches: Imagined or Real”

One of a technician's most difficult problems to deal with is "itches." These are often attributed to "cable lice," "paper fleas," and other mythical pests. This article deals with those situations where itches or bites are attributed to "insects" or "bugs" of some type. Many times the "bugs" are invisible. This article does not deal with real insect problems or delusory parasitosis (insects coming out of the body) but rather focuses on causes of itching or dermatitis. Many times itches are from environmental irritants.

Itches fall into several categories. Some are caused by insects, mites or other arthropods. These are usually easy to identify and resolve. Medical issues such as allergies, skin rashes associated with diabetes, jaundice, chicken pox, and circulatory problems, can also cause itches. Imaginary itches where insects are inside the body and "coming out" are medical issues and must be treated as such. The real challenge are those "bites" caused by environmental irritants and blamed on insects. Even more challenging is a combination of the above factors.

Years ago our industry would handle the environmental irritant itch case by just "spraying" or "fogging." We did this to appease the customer and it actually worked. Here's why: During cold winter months the humidity inside buildings will drop to 12%. This is a very dry environment and employees that work with materials that become airborne start getting "bites." If a company came in and sprayed and fogged the liquid would actually put moisture in the air and the fogging would tie up the irritants. The customer was conditioned that there were bugs and the service technician actually killed them. Of course, when the liquids and oils evaporated and the environment changed back, the irritants once again came back and caused the "bites" and the cycle was started all over. Also during summer months, employees are working in air-conditioned offices and humidity levels rise and fall. Air conditioning actually takes moisture out of the air. Employees may be working in yards or gardens, using sun-tanning lotions, going outside for breaks. The opening and closing of skin pores allows irritants to quickly cause dermatitis and cause a "bite."

We should always approach these itch cases with the thought that something is causing the itching and we will try to identify the cause of the problem. Always avoid using the term "bite." This implies that an insect is causing the problem. Also we must avoid "spraying" to just appease the customer. This automatically tells them an insect is actually the cause and we have taken on the problem forever.

**IDENTIFYING THE PROBLEM.** The first thing to do is meet with your customer contact for his or her assessment of the situation. If your contact is convinced insects are the problem (and they are not) you need to start the education process there. Explain that you will be making an inspection, setting out monitors and will try to determine what is causing the itches. You will need to do some fact-finding such as changes to the area (e.g., new carpets, drapes, construction, etc.). The next step is to actually meet with those employees having the problem. Explain who you are and that you are there to find out the cause of the itching. Start off by saying that if insects are causing the bites you will find and identify them and offer a solution. Also state that if insects are not present and environmental irritants are present you will address that as well. You may mention at this point some of the office situations that can cause contact dermatitis. These include: paper fibers, static electricity, new carpets, and you could even mention lack of circulation. After finding out who is having the problem, perform a thorough inspection.



Cotton balls dipped in alcohol or baby oil are the best materials to take swab samples. Place out insect monitors to trap irritants or "insects" if present. You may catch some gnats or other small insects, so be prepared to discuss the biting versus the non-biting flies. A microscope set up in the area of the people being bothered proves very helpful in showing them environmental irritants. Always open a desk drawer and swab the metal or wooden guides. The cotton swab will pick up metal shavings and other debris. Put this under the scope and let the employees look at it. Explain that the metal shavings could be coming off the guides and lodging on their ankles. With humidity levels low or changing, they may rub the area and actually cause the skin to become irritated and cause an itch. Check behind cabinets that have not been moved in awhile and always swab the ceiling vents, both intakes and exhaust. If irritants are found on the supply ducts, then a problem exists in the filtering system in the heat or air-conditioning system. Always check the filters in the air-handling system. See how often the filters are changed.

The list of things that cause contact dermatitis continues to grow. It includes: static electricity (facial rashes) and dry air, carbonless copy paper, paper fibers (tearing forms or computer paper), fabrics, insulation, drapes, upholstery, nylon (carpets and stockings), allergens (cat and dog dander), fungi (humidifiers and A/C systems), mold, mildew, pollen, insect parts (cockroach allergens), volatile organic compounds, polycyclic aromatic compounds, soaps, deodorants, creams and fragrances, etc.

**SOLUTIONS.** If an environmental irritant is causing the dermatitis, remove it through cleaning. HEPA (High Efficiency Particle Arresting) filtration may solve the problem. It may be necessary to use anti-static compounds and to adjust temperatures and humidity levels. Moisturizing the skin may also help alleviate the problem. An industrial hygienist or environmental hygienist may be needed for consultation. The last thing you want to do is to treat with pesticides. There are ethical, legal and liability issues with this course of action. When you treat you are admitting that insects are present and causing the problem. Could you then be required to "treat" every employee's home since you failed to "control" the biting bugs at the office or work place? Think about it. These "itch" problems seem to occur at the wrong time and usually take a lot of time and effort, but solving them brings a sense of satisfaction and customer loyalty that will be worth the time, effort and professional problem-solving process that our customers deserve.

**CONCLUSION.** It is important that all employees in your company are solving these problems in a consistent manner. Many times employees complaining of itches will put pressure on your account contact and labor issues and conflicts may arise. We all need to approach these situations as an opportunity to solve a sensitive and often complex issue for our customers. The key is education, customer cooperation and a thorough inspection to find and identify the cause of the environmental irritant.

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