The Gypsy Moth and Health Impacts

The impact of the Gypsy Moth (Lymantria dispar dispar) has been severe in pockets on Otty Lake. Some residents have been fighting the devastation for two years while others have noticed patches of egg masses since the leaves fell last autumn. Now, as we welcome May, the stories on 2-5mm caterpillars hatching in masses starts the season yet again! These small caterpillars can be seen suspended by a long thread of silk that it hangs onto with its mouth. As the wind blows, these new arrivals balloon for a distance up to one kilometre as a means of dispersal to land on a lush tree to begin feeding. You may have experienced a flight that went off course and caused the young adventurer to land on you!

As a person who has dealt with significant health concerns following extensive scraping of gypsy moth egg masses and the subsequent comments by doctors that this is occurring locally, I feel obliged to share my research as an allergic resident, not a scientist.

The Gypsy Moth Rash

In an article written in the Sudbury Star (June 5, 2020) the reporter describes this rash as caused by "histamines in the hollow hairs of gypsy moth caterpillars that pierce the skin which causes the body to react in the form of an itchy, bubbly rash – similar to the symptoms of poison ivy." The irritating hairs or spines of these caterpillars, and less commonly moths, may cause localized stinging, itching, an eczema-like rash or a systemic reaction, more likely experienced by those with asthma and serious allergies.

The rash is likely to occur more frequently on children due to their curiosity and active handling of caterpillars. Because caterpillars and larvae can be hand picked and crushed, the spines can pierce the skin of those of us who are trying to care for our suffering trees. Some believe that the female can excrete these hollow hairs or wing scales as a form of protection when laying eggs, thus causing a concern to those (such a myself) who scrape these masses. Young or old, the rash usually occurs 8 to 12 hours after contact and most symptoms disappear in about a week.

Avoiding a Reaction

The arms, face and neck are more frequently reported as extremely itchy. The wearing of a hat, gloves and long-sleeves is encouraged (much like avoidance strategies for ticks). Immediate washing of the area may lessen the response. Don't panic but avoid touching your eyes or mouth.

Treatment

This type of contact dermatitis benefits from the removal of specula which could be imbedded, using tape or tweezers where visible. Over-the-counter medications such as topical steroid cream, antiseptic cream and antihistamine tablets reduce the reaction. Systemic reactions and auto-immune complications can occasionally arise resulting in medical intervention and oral steroids such as prednisone.

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