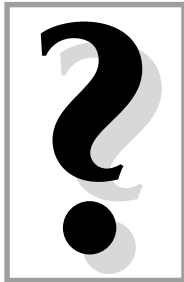

DELUSORY PARASITOSIS: WHAT'S ATTACKING ME?



They feel like bugs, worms, or mites that are biting, crawling, or burrowing into, under, or out of your skin. They must be there because you can feel them and even

feel sure you see them. You may also think that your home or furniture is infested, but you may be the only one who knows they are there. No one seems to believe they exist except you. Nothing seems to get rid of them. So what are they?

And, what if your condition seems to be spreading to other family members or to your friends? What if, after trying every reasonable approach and helpful hint from friends, your problem persists? Then it's time to read the rest of this publication and seek the proper type of professional help.

Who can help you resolve this sort of problem? The **first** person to contact should be your family physician or primary health care provider. Medical professionals are the only individuals who are allowed to diagnose your condition and recommend specific treatment. Dermatologists, in particular, are trained to deal most effectively with disorders of the skin and their causes, including parasites. If the disorder is caused by a parasite, most physicians can recognize the most common of the parasites. Often it may be useful to have specimens submitted to entomologists, parasitologists, or other biologists for verification or identification. These narrowly focused experts not only

can identify or rule out various kinds of parasites that may be causing your condition, but they can provide additional biological information that may greatly assist the physician and you in arriving at a satisfactory diagnosis and treatment.

- Most entomologists are skilled in the identification of various life stages of insects or mites or can use the correct references to determine what they are.
- Medical entomologists, in particular, spend their careers working with insects, mites, and ticks that attack people.
- Parasitologists study these and other groups of organisms such as parasitic worms, protozoans, and other invertebrates that live at the expense of their animal hosts.

Initially, you may have tried to solve the problem by consulting nonmedical professionals. However, if you do not seek professional medical advice, you may miss the opportunity to be properly diagnosed, especially if arthropods or other parasites are not the culprits.

If you have consulted with any, or perhaps several, of the above mentioned professionals and still no one can pinpoint an offending organism, it is very unlikely that all of them are wrong. It is time to reassess your situation and look for a cause other than a pest organism. Itching, crawling, or burrowing sensations may be the result of many seemingly unrelated medical conditions, including

- stress,
- reactions to use, or abuse, of prescription or illicit drugs,

- allergic sensitivity to nonliving substances in your environment; office paper dust is a well-known example,
- dry skin,
- skin cancers,
- vitamin, protein or other deficiencies in your diet,
- diabetes mellitus,
- cerebrovascular disease,
- hypothyroidism, or
- delusory parasitosis.

Thorough testing, including a complete physical checkup by a perceptive physician, should lead to an accurate diagnosis and treatment for most sensations of infestation caused by metabolic disorders or other medical problems listed above. Often, merely reducing or learning to deal with stress will eliminate the sensations. But, if this and/or thorough allergy and medical testing leave you with a "clean bill of health," and the symptoms still persist, you have to consider seriously the possibility that you may be mistaken in your belief that you are infested with some sort of arthropod or other parasite.

The medical disorder in which a patient has a mistaken belief of being infested by parasites such as mites, lice, fleas, spiders, worms, bacteria, or other organisms is called *delusory parasitosis*. This belief is based on the sensations felt in the skin that are very real to the sufferer. These sensations of irritation, itching, or of crawling organisms are so real that the victim is driven to believe that something has to be there. Usually, the patient scratches the itches, but they don't go away. More scratching leads

to rashes, open wounds and sores, then to possible infections. Failure to obtain relief from over-the-counter or prescribed medications often drives the sufferer to apply unconventional and, sometimes, highly toxic compounds to the body in a desperate attempt to alleviate symptoms. Skin conditions can worsen or become much more complicated.

In some cases the parasites appear to be visible to the afflicted person, but they cannot be caught. In an attempt to discover the causative agent, some people will submit pieces of his or her own tissues to medical or other professionals in a desperate attempt to produce samples of the pests.

Very often a corollary problem associated with or underlying delusory parasitosis is stress. Stress often manifests itself in people as a nervous habit or "nervous tic," but those conditions usually are not overwhelming. Delusory parasitosis, however, can become debilitating because it tends to amplify the stress level and, in turn, the condition worsens.

Stress is known to be associated with many health problems in Americans. Stress may result from numerous

experiences including job-related pressures, personal relationships, divorce, loneliness, financial problems, and loss of friends, relatives, or pets. Frequently, reducing stress levels coincides with a rapid reduction or elimination of delusory parasitosis.

Your doctor usually can assist in finding ways to reduce your level of stress. However, when delusory parasitosis is persistent, your physician may want to prescribe medicines that alleviate symptoms, at least temporarily, while more permanent solutions are sought. If a physician determines that further therapy or advice is needed, the patient may be referred to a psychiatrist. Delusory parasitosis is a real problem, but with professional help, relief can be obtained.

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For more information contact the University of California Cooperative Extension or agricultural commissioner's office in your county. See your phone book for addresses and phone numbers.

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