



# Press Release

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**Contact**

ERMC Public Affairs Office  
DSN 371-3317/3049  
Tel. 06221-17-3317/3049  
[ermc-pao@amedd.army.mil](mailto:ermc-pao@amedd.army.mil)  
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## Oak Processionary moth caterpillars cause rash, asthma

**HEIDELBERG, Germany** – A hairy caterpillar common to central and southern Europe may be hazardous to your health.

“Hairs from Oak Processionary moth caterpillar contain thaumetopoein, a toxin that may cause a rash or, if inhaled, asthma,” said Maj. Lesly Calix, Chief of the Department of Medical and Veterinary Entomology at the U.S. Army Public Health Command Region - Europe.

That can happen if people touch the caterpillars or their nests, or if the hairs are blown by the wind into contact with people, he said.

The Oak Processionary caterpillar lives in oak trees from May through July.

“The most common symptoms are the itchy rash and dermatitis, an inflammatory skin condition,” Calix said.

The rash may consist of flat discolorations or raised bumps on the skin. If the caterpillar hairs come in contact with eyes or mouth, a person may develop conjunctivitis (red eyes, sticky discharge, and inflammation of the eye) and/or irritation to the throat/airway. Itching typically begins 2-12 hours after exposure and the rash may be widely spread over the entire body.

The best way to prevent Oak Processionary caterpillar rash is to avoid them.

“The hairs are very fine and you likely will not notice them simply by inspecting your clothing,” said Calix.

Follow these tips to avoid caterpillar hairs:

- Do not touch caterpillars or nests.
- Do not try to remove nests by yourself. Call your local Pest Control shop.
- Do not play/picnic/walk under oak trees during peak infestation months (May-July).
- Do not wear short-sleeved clothing in the woods or walk in the under wood. When participating in outdoor activities, use wear long clothing and a hat.
- Keep children away from caterpillars and nests.

- If you get exposed to the oak caterpillar hairs, take a shower and wash your clothes immediately.
- Consult a physician in case of severe exposure.

If you experience rash-like symptoms or itching and over-the-counter remedies are not working, please make a medical appointment. If you are experiencing any other symptoms please make an appointment to see a health care provider.

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Photos: Oak Processionary caterpillar nest and caterpillars.  
Photos courtesy of the Great Britain Forestry Commission  
Web link: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk>)