



Booklice (*Psocids*)

From time to time people find that their food cupboards have been infested with tiny grey or brown insects. These are often found on the packaging of dry goods such as flour, milk powder, sugar or semolina. It is natural but often incorrect to assume that the products themselves are always at fault. The aim of this leaflet is to explain what these insects are and how best to prevent them.

Psocids – or booklice – are common but harmless insects between and 2 mm long, which can survive in dry powdery foods. They are not caused by poor hygiene and are just as common in the cleanest of homes be they old or new. They prefer to live in dark, warm, humid places – such as folds of packaging in food cupboards and dislike light or disturbance. They feed on a wide variety of dry food products – such as flour- and also the microscopic moulds that develop in humid conditions. They may live for about 6 months during which time the female may lay up to 100 eggs. Our research has shown that the sorts of *Psocids* (there are several different types) which cause problems in homes are rarely found where food is produced.

They prefer areas with high humidity but can tolerate dry conditions for some days. The kitchen is likely to provide the conditions they need and fitted cupboards provide the darkness which attracts them. Some food products including flour naturally contain some moisture. Moisture in the home can be caused by not having enough ventilation in the kitchen or bathroom. In warm conditions they can rapidly increase in number. This is most likely to occur during the summer months when temperatures are higher, leading to their discovery in autumn.

Prevention and Cure

It is best to keep all dry foods in cool larders or cupboards with ventilation. If this is not possible make sure that your cupboards are always free from condensation and damp. If you notice that condensation occurs in your kitchen, particularly during cooking or washing, open your windows. If the problem is continual it may be necessary to take additional precautions. Advice on preventing condensation should be sought from the Environmental Health Department.

If you discover insects, do not use an insecticide because of the danger of contaminating your food. The best method of getting rid of them is to remove and dispose of all affected food. Clean the cupboard by using a DRY cloth or by vacuuming. Empty the contents into an external dustbin. Make sure the food cupboard is completely dry before replacing any foods. This may be achieved by using a hair dryer.

Key Points

- Keep kitchen and food storage cupboards well ventilated and dry.
- Check food cupboards regularly, using contents in best before, date order.
- Store vulnerable food like flour in washable covered containers.
- Check the food packaging before purchase to ensure it is undamaged.
- Check the food on opening to ensure it is not infested with insects.
- *Psocides* like warm, moist, dark conditions, without which they are unable to survive.