

ASTHMA SUFFERERS AT RISK FROM EXPLOSION OF DUST MITES AS HOUSE

Hot, humid days spawn plagues of insects

Susan Young

THE sunny periods and scattered showers of summer 1991 have prompted an explosion in insect numbers, and threaten serious health problems for asthmatics during the next few months.

For the humid conditions are ideal for insects to breed and thrive. They include the house dust mite, which lives in bedding and carpets and causes most asthma attacks. Two thousand deaths are caused by asthma in Britain every year, and the condition prevents hundreds of thousands of sufferers from leading normal lives.

Dr John Maunder, director of the Medical Entomology Centre at Cambridge University, believes the house dust mite is a serious problem that neither doctors nor the NHS take seriously enough.

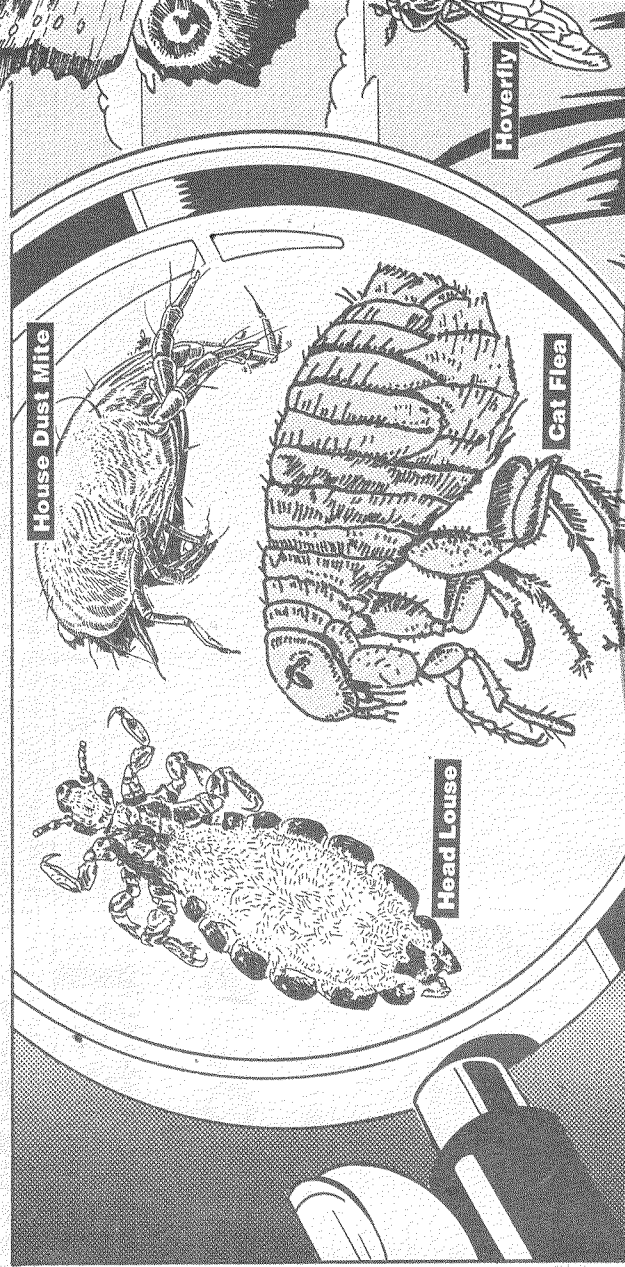
He said: 'Around 40,000 people alive now are going to die of

asthma. Hundreds of thousands are very seriously affected by the disease. Five million are on medication costing the NHS £450million each year, which simply suppresses the symptoms — and yet they don't employ a single medical entomologist working on prevention.

'If it was a bacterium doing the same thing the Government would have a hundred fully funded microbiologists by the end of the month.

'There's no doubt that people are going to be more ill this autumn and in turn there is going to be more mortality. But most of these deaths are avoidable'.

Pillows are the root cause of the problem. Over 4,000 mites per gram of dust have been found on pillows in Birmingham, which is one of the damper parts of the country. A similar experiment in London yielded around 2,500 per gram.



Head Louse

House Dust Mite

Cat Flea

Hoverfly

The mites feed on skin particles and other human debris, and get their vital moisture supply topped up by the sleeper's breath. In turn, the pillow user is ideally placed to inhale both the mites and their dung, causing wheezing.

Doctors have the right idea in sending patients for holidays in Morocco or the Alps, where the air is too dry for the mites to thrive. But the trouble will start again on the first night back at home, says Dr Maunder.

He recommends that asthmatics and sufferers from dust-mite allergy should throw away old pillows that are filled with years of accumulated dung and spray replacements with Actomite, which should keep the pests at bay for a year.

It isn't just dust mites that are in for a good summer. Most insects adore humid conditions, and those that live indoors, such as cockroaches and cat fleas, find such weather particularly beneficial since water supplies are usually a problem. Dr Maunder warns cat owners that a population explosion of fleas is likely, given the weather conditions. Not only are they breeding faster, but the maggots are maturing into adult fleas more quickly.

The best answer is to spray the house with Methoprene — putting pesticides on the cat is almost useless he says. 'The trouble is that people with cats often become immune to the bites and don't notice them any more. Friends are too

embarrassed to tell them, and so they don't visit. The only person who does visit is the vicar — and he's wearing Wellington boots to avoid getting bitten — and so the owners get lonely and acquire more cats,' says Dr Maunder cheerfully.

And although the flea season is only just starting, both councils and Rentokil report soaring call-out figures from desperate home owners.

Other household pests that are thriving include cockroaches and Pharaoh ants which infest many high-rise estates and are almost impossible to dislodge because of the many hiding places where they can lurk. Ordinary ants have also proved a problem. Sales of just one treatment chemical have

risen by a third this year. Hazards outside — multiplying rapidly — Mosquitoes and the smallest puddle-breeding and wasps — are thriving. Their period is likely to be another month, queens die and the both hungry and at

Head lice are expected summer hit. Crow, marketing Wellcome Pharmaceuticals most children are in school but by adult school holidays. culprits are dotting ers who do not know infected — for some avoid adult men al