

The Douglas-Fir Tussock Moth and Tussockosis



Douglas-fir tussock moth mature larva (caterpillar)

Male Douglas-fir tussock moth

What is the Douglas-fir tussock moth?

The Douglas-fir tussock moth is a **native insect** in the low-lying, dry belt Douglas-fir regions of southern British Columbia. **It is not an introduced species.** It feeds primarily on Douglas-fir, and occasionally on ponderosa pine and western larch. Ornamental spruce and pine may also be affected in urban areas. During epidemics, tussock moth caterpillars devastate trees, ranging from loss of new needles on branch tips all the way to complete defoliation and tree mortality. Outbreaks generally last between 2-4 years.

How does it affect humans?

Tussock moth caterpillars are covered in thousands of tiny hairs. There are also hairs present on the female moth, egg masses and cocoons. These hairs may cause an allergic reaction called **tussockosis**. Itching is the most common complaint, but other symptoms include rashes, watery eyes and sneezing. People with a general history of allergies may be more susceptible to **tussockosis**. The degree of irritation depends on the severity of the outbreak, amount of contact with caterpillars and the sensitivity of the individual. If a person is very sensitive, these reactions may be cumulative, increasing in severity with repeated exposure.

Preventative measures against tussockosis

Nearly one in five people display symptoms of **tussockosis**. Here are a few precautions to minimize these effects:

- Avoid infested areas.
- Avoid handling the caterpillars or any other life stage. Wear gloves and other protective clothing if necessary.
- Wash hands and any exposed skin frequently with soap and water.
- Change clothing and take a cool shower in areas of heavy infestation.
- Do not shake clothing prior to laundering.
- Wash outdoor furniture and equipment before use.
- Use an over-the-counter remedy for itching if symptoms persist.

If you experience severe symptoms

Seek medical attention immediately if you are experiencing severe symptoms.

How the public can help

Contact the Southern Interior Regional Office in Kamloops to report new infestations or to obtain additional information.

For more information on Douglas-fir tussock moth and its control, please contact:

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Photographs by Dion Manastyrski

