

# Identifying OPM caterpillars

- 1 They live almost exclusively in oak trees, which are identifiable by their distinctive leaves.
- 2 They move in nose-to-tail processions, in oak trees or on the ground, hence their name.
- 3 They often cluster together.
- 4 They build white, silken webbing trails and nests – usually dome or teardrop-shaped – on oak trunks and branches (not among the leaves).
- 5 The nests soon become discoloured.



## If you see nests or caterpillars:

- Follow the advice in this leaflet for staying safe.
- Report it using our Tree Alert on-line reporting form at [forestresearch.gov.uk/opm](http://forestresearch.gov.uk/opm) (preferred); or
- e-mail it to [opm@forestrycommission.gov.uk](mailto:opm@forestrycommission.gov.uk), or telephone it to 0300 067 4442.
- When submitting a report, please include photographs and location details.

## But first, please:

- CHECK that they're in or near an oak tree – OPM caterpillars usually only attack other trees if they run out of oak leaves to eat.

## For further information

For OPM tools and resources, visit [forestresearch.gov.uk/opm](http://forestresearch.gov.uk/opm)

Tel: 0300 067 4442

E-mail: [opm@forestrycommission.gov.uk](mailto:opm@forestrycommission.gov.uk)

Health information is available from NHS Choices at [nhs.uk/conditions/insect-bites-and-stings](http://nhs.uk/conditions/insect-bites-and-stings)

The Forestry Commission will consider all requests to make the content of publications available in alternative formats. Please call 0300 067 4000.

For more information on tree pests and diseases, visit [gov.uk/government/collections/tree-pests-and-diseases](http://gov.uk/government/collections/tree-pests-and-diseases)



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# Oak Processionary Moth (OPM)



Information  
for the public



[forestresearch.gov.uk/opm](http://forestresearch.gov.uk/opm)

## Key facts

**Caterpillars of the oak processionary moth (OPM) are a pest which can be a hazard to the health of oak trees, people and animals in this area.**

Their tiny hairs can be blown about by the wind and cause itchy skin rashes, eye and throat irritations and, occasionally, breathing difficulties in people and animals.

The caterpillars eat oak leaves. Large numbers can strip whole trees bare, leaving them vulnerable to other threats.

OPM is a native species of southern Europe which was accidentally introduced to England.

Left uncontrolled, it would spread across much of Britain.

Our precious oak trees could be at risk, people could be deterred from visiting or working in woodlands, animals could be exposed to suffering, and control could become prohibitively expensive.

The Forestry Commission, local authorities and landowners are working hard to control this pest so that we can continue to safely enjoy our parks, gardens and woodlands. You can help by reporting signs of OPM to us. See the section headed **'If you see nests or caterpillars'** overleaf for reporting details.

### Human and animal health

The caterpillars have thousands of tiny hairs which contain an irritating substance called **thaumetopoein**. Contact with the hairs can cause itching skin rashes and, less commonly, sore throats, breathing difficulties and eye irritations.

Henry Kuppen

## Controlling OPM

Caterpillars start emerging in April from eggs laid in oak trees the previous summer. The most effective control method is to treat affected oak trees with insecticide during the spring and summer while the caterpillars are about.

With careful timing and application, the treatment products have minimal effects on other species. The preferred product is not known to harm people, pets, livestock and other animals. Most spraying is done from the ground and is supplemented by removing caterpillars' nests. This is most effectively done with vacuum equipment when the caterpillars are inside them resting or pupating into adult moths.

### Tree health

Infested trees are found by professional and volunteer surveyors, tree- and ground-care professionals, and members of the public reporting sightings. We use pheromone trapping in late summer to find adult moths, which provides clues to where we should look the following year.



OPM gets its name from the caterpillars' habit of moving in nose-to-tail processions, as in this picture.



Max Blake

OPM caterpillars can be a hazard to oak trees because they feed on the leaves. Large populations can strip trees bare, leaving them vulnerable to other pests and diseases, and less able to withstand events such as drought and flood.



## Protecting yourself

**KNOW HOW** to recognise oak trees, caterpillars, and their nests and trails (see pictures overleaf);

**KEEP AWAY** from caterpillars and nests.

**TEACH** your children to keep away.

**KEEP** your pets away. Caterpillars and nests can be on the ground, and animals can suffer considerable distress from hairs in their mouths and noses.

**DO NOT** try removing nests or caterpillars yourself – report them to the Forestry Commission (see next page), and visit [forestryresearch.gov.uk/opm](https://www.forestryresearch.gov.uk/opm) for guidance.

**SEE A PHARMACIST** if you need relief from a skin or eye irritation following possible OPM contact.

**SEE A GP** or consult NHS111 if you have a serious allergic reaction.

**CONTACT A VET** if your pet has been affected.

Further health advice is available at [nhs.uk/conditions/insect-bites-and-stings](https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/insect-bites-and-stings)



**The greatest risk period is June to August, but nests should always be avoided because they can contain thousands of shed hairs.**