

Wool Worm and Abscesses

Overview

The objective of this bulletin is to highlight the issue of wool abscesses. The only known research that has been conducted is a survey of women in the industry by retired midwife, Gelske Gardiner. The survey highlighted the fact that little is known about this occupational health hazard, although people working in the wool industry certainly know of its existence. There appeared to be an increase in incidence the longer people worked in the wool industry. What is not known is if this is an exposure issue, or if people become more complacent about taking precautions. Her survey also highlighted the fact that more research needs to be done in the area of protective clothing and prevention.

What is Wool Worm and What Causes It?

It is caused by wool fibres, particularly short second cuts, entering clothing and penetrating the skin forming either a rash or abscess. The most commonly reported area of infection is the breast. Other affected areas are the arms, hands, fingers, legs and armpit. When wool penetrates the breast, it can get into the milk ducts and sebaceous glands causing infection and abscess formation.

There are many non-conclusive theories as to why some people develop an abscess. Some people spoken to think that if you sweat a lot and have large pores, it is easier for wool to

penetrate. Another line of thought is that the close work with lanolin softens your skin allowing penetration of fibres. Some of the women in the survey thought that cross-bred wool was worse, others stated fine wool was more likely to get into the pores.

Who Is At Risk?

Any person working closely with wool is at risk of developing an abscess, both men and women. An article in the *Shearing Magazine* told of a man who had suffered from wool penetrating the webs between his fingers and into the sides of his knuckles. He eventually had to have surgery to remove it.

Women need to take particular care due to the risk of developing a breast abscess, which can be painful and disfiguring. Any infection to the breast can cause damage to the delicate tissue and milk ducts are easily damaged and narrowed. Abscesses can also cause difficulty with breast-feeding due to the formation of scar tissue.

Warning Signs

Wool fibres can collect beneath the skin and start an infection. Any rash or pustule, especially if it is weeping, could be the beginning of an abscess. The collection of pus, inflamed (reddened) tissue, lump, pain and possible increase in temperature are all warning signs of an abscess.

Treatment

If in doubt, seek medical advice. Early detection and treatment is vital. Some people appear to treat themselves at home through traditional methods. Gelske Gardiner stated in an article in the shearing magazine that not all treatments were successful. She recommended doctors “use a Woolwich Shield first to draw the fibre out the way it went in, and only use the scalpel as a last resort”. Woolwich Shields are available from the chemist and are more commonly used for women who have inverted nipples.

Prevention

With very limited research being done in this area, we can only offer suggestions. Some women who took part in the survey felt there was no point in preventing fibres penetrating the skin as, in their words - “*nothing worked. The fibres get into your clothes and no amount of washing gets them out*”. Many people check themselves during a shower or bath and use tweezers to remove the fibres. Other people used some of the ideas below as preventative measures:

- Good hygiene.
- Wash working clothes separately from other clothing.
- Cover nicks and cuts with waterproof dressings.
- Use of protective clothing, e.g.
 - gloves
 - wear specially designed bras
 - put gladwrap inside your bra
 - cover nipples with occlusive dressing
 - put nursing pads inside your bra.

Regular checks should become part of your daily hygiene routine. If any problems are noted, please do not hesitate to seek medical advice.

References

Gelske Gardiner: *Wool Fibre Infections Survey 1998*.

David Grace: *New Zealand Shearing Magazine*, Vol. 6, 1 March 1990.

David Grace: *New Zealand Shearing Magazine*, Vol. 14, 2 August 1998 – “Fighting the Wool Worm Menace”.