



# HONEY BEE HEALTH



MP547

# Honey Bee Health

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## Introduction

Honey bees and other pollinators have been declining in abundance and species diversity around the world. The term Colony Collapse Disorder (CCD) was coined in 2006 to describe the mysterious, large-scale sudden disappearances of honey bees in North America and Europe. There is no single cause for these declines, but rather a combination of numerous interacting conditions that include parasites, pathogens, poor nutrition, and exposure to environmental pollution and pesticides. Each of these factors can stress individual bees, and their combination results in weakened colonies that may ultimately fail.

Rather than memorizing the symptoms of all potential maladies, beekeepers should first understand how a healthy colony of honey bees looks and behaves. New beekeepers should begin with healthy bees in brand new equipment. By starting small and watching colonies grow, a new beekeeper can witness bees drawing comb, storing pollen and honey, and can observe all the various growth stages of honey bee from eggs to adults. Becoming familiar with a healthy colony better prepares a beekeeper to later recognize problems in early stages, and to intervene before problems become significant.

Beekeepers are encouraged to take an integrated approach to honey bee health. By understanding and minimizing multiple stressors on bees, beekeepers can improve overall colony health and increase hive productivity.

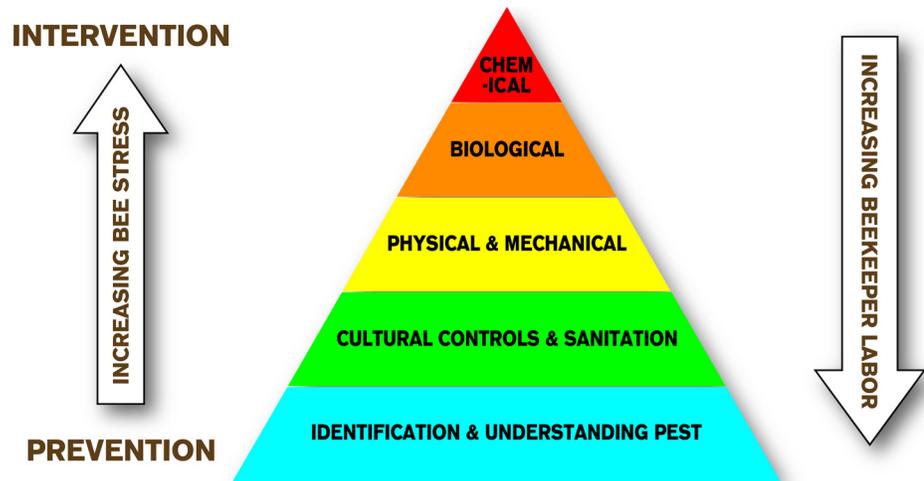
## Beekeeping IPM

**Integrated Pest Management (IPM)** incorporates multiple tactics to reduce pest populations while being sensitive to both economics and environmental impacts. The approach integrates multiple tools to find the most effective, least intrusive solution to problems. Because eradication is rarely possible, pests should be managed to reduce their negative effects. The overall goal is to improve colony health while reducing dependence on pesticide use. It is not necessarily the same as organic pest control, but many of the same tactics can be employed using strict organic methods.

The concept of IPM was developed in response to over-use of pesticides in agriculture, and the tendency to use these products on a calendar schedule regardless of the presence of economically important pests. A combination of IPM tactics reduces the impact of pests, and reduces the impact of pesticides on non-pest species. It makes economic sense to treat only when and where pests are a problem. IPM also preserves treatment products for future use by delaying the development of pesticide resistance within pest populations.

The concept of Integrated Pest Management can be illustrated with a pyramid. Understanding the biology and life cycle of a pest is the foundation for disrupting its reproduction and limiting the damage it can cause. Also, determining the level of pest or disease present, as well as where it is most likely present, is important for making treatment decisions. Therefore accurately sampling the pest population is key to IPM.

*The IPM pyramid emphasizes the prevention of pest problems rather than intervention after problems arise.*



Cultural controls include beekeeping practices that reduce stress and improve bee health. This begins with placing hives in a suitable environment. Also, management decisions to split, combine, or requeen hives will affect the brood population, and ultimately the mite population. Diseases that affect only larvae can also be disrupted by breaking the brood cycle in a colony.

Physical and mechanical controls include any improvements or modifications to hive equipment that prevent or exclude pests, or actively trap pests that have entered the hive. These include screen bottom boards to eliminate fallen mites, and various in-hive traps for small hive beetles. Activities such as drone-trapping of varroa mites, and keeping hives in good physical repair to prevent the ingress of beetles, wax moths, and robbing bees are also important components of physical control.

Biological control includes the selection of genetic stock that can tolerate or resist mites or diseases, as well as nematodes to control small hive beetles pupating outside the hive. Biological control research for mites has focused on fungal and microbial pathogens and the use of mite predators, but delivery and application of these organisms is often difficult. Unfortunately no practical biological control agent for varroa mites has yet been found.

Reducing pesticide use is the goal of IPM, and so chemical control, at the top of the pyramid, is the smallest tier. When selecting medications and pesticide treatments for in-hive use, consider materials with high specificity for mites but low toxicity to bees, and little potential for chemical residues to be left behind.

The base of the IPM pyramid emphasizes prevention, while tactics near the top emphasize intervention. While chemical treatment may seem like the easiest solution, these products can also cause physiological stress on colonies. Regularly evaluating hives involves labor, but beekeepers should remain aware of colony conditions and keep pest and disease levels low throughout the season to minimize the need for chemical intervention.

There are many sources of stress that affect honey bee health. Reducing the impact of these hive stressors at every level, and all season long, will result in stronger, more productive colonies with healthier bees that will be better able to take care of themselves.

## Parasites and Pathogens

A primary enemy to honey bees is a complex of damaging parasitic mites and the viruses they can transmit. Outbreaks of other pathogens, including bacteria and fungi, can also affect bee health. Overuse of medications causes mites and bacteria to develop resistance to medications, which makes them harder to control. Beneficial microbes inhabit the digestive system of honey bees and competitively exclude pathogens. These beneficial microbes may be negatively affected by medications or environmental pesticides.

## Honey Bee Nutrition

The availability of quality food in the landscape affects honey bee health. High floral diversity throughout the year supports the healthiest bees. Natural environments continue to be replaced by heavily managed landscapes. Urban areas often have limited or reduced floral resources while the number of urban beekeepers continues to increase. Agricultural areas may offer large areas of forage, but with severely limited diversity, and high potential for pesticide exposure.

## Pesticides and Pollution

Both agricultural and urban areas contain risks of chemical exposure to foraging bees. The dangers of these products varies with the toxicity of the ingredients, formulations, application procedures, and drift onto non-target areas. Outside contamination of hive products (wax, honey, or pollen) is possible, but the highest levels of detectable contaminants come from products applied in the hive by beekeepers. Over-use of miticides and antibiotics within the hive, as well as the misuse of legal products and the off-label use of non-approved chemicals all have effects on bee health.

## Climate and Weather

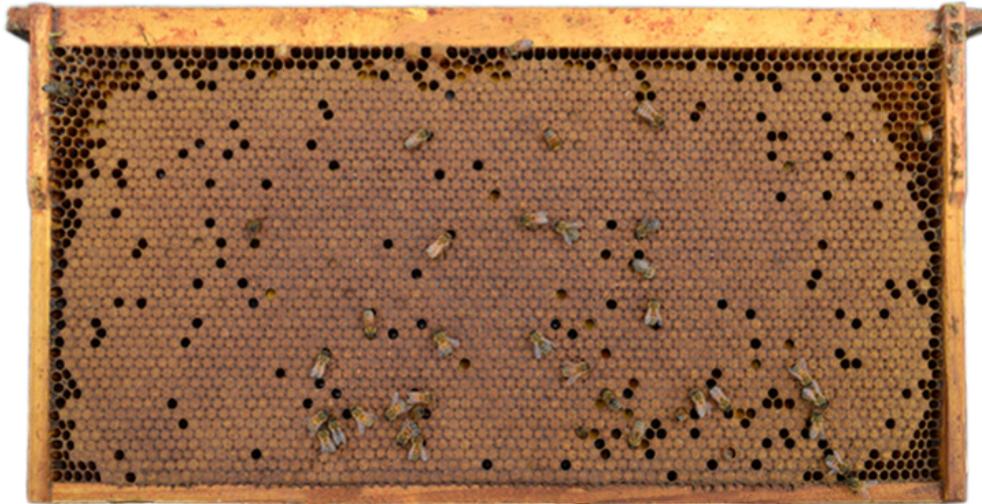
Climate and local weather conditions affect the bloom period and food available for honey bees. Long-term changes in climate and weather patterns will have significant effects on bee health due to changes in resource availability. Unusually wet periods mean that bees cannot fly out to forage, reducing stored resources. Bees consume more resources than they are gathering during periods of prolonged drought. Unusually warm winters lead to increased bee activity and brood rearing during months with little or no floral resources, potentially depleting winter stores early, and causing late winter mortality.

## Beekeeper Practices

Beekeepers need to make conscious choices to reduce colony stress from all sources. They should actively monitor and manage varroa mites and other hive pests and diseases throughout the season. Ensure that bees have access to sufficient quality forage or provide supplemental food when necessary. Locate hives in areas protected from pesticide drift, and keep hives in good physical repair.

## Reading the Brood Pattern

When inspecting a colony, examination of the brood nest should give satisfactory evidence of queen quality and overall health of the colony. The capped brood is the easiest to see, and its appearance can be used to evaluate the egg production (and therefore the overall quality) of a particular queen.



A **solid brood pattern** (above) indicates a competent, well fed queen has placed an egg in nearly every cell. A few empty cells are expected, as some may not have been empty or clean when the queen was laying eggs, or these could be due to hygienic bees removing pupae infested with varroa mites. As the brood matures and adult bees begin to emerge, they should do so in an obvious pattern, following the course where the queen deposited eggs.

A **spotty brood pattern (below)** has numerous random empty cells, lacking pupae, which are not the result of systematic adult emergence. A poor brood pattern may suggest a brood disease, a heavy mite infestation, or an inbred queen. The appearance of spotty brood should prompt the beekeeper to look closely into individual cells for more clues about the problem.



## Parasitic Mites

Asian honey bees are natural hosts to several species of parasitic mites. Movement of European honey bees around the world has placed them into contact with exotic parasites and pathogens for which they have little or no natural resistance or tolerance, and has helped to spread new pests around the globe. Mites attack and feed on honey bees, physically weakening them and impairing their immune systems, while vectoring viruses and other pathogens. The result is a mite-virus complex that can be more dangerous to bee health than either mites or viruses alone. Because there are currently no practical treatments for honey bee viruses, managing for low mite populations is the best strategy to limit the transmission of these viruses.

### Varroa Mites

The varroa mite (*Varroa destructor*) is considered the greatest threat to honey bees and beekeeping in most of the world, and are widespread across the U.S. While only about 1/16" wide, these parasites are very large in proportion to the body size of their host, and can have a severe impact on honey bee health.

Varroa mites spend much of their lives hidden in cells, and even if they are not apparent, beekeepers should assume mites are present. These external parasites feed on fluids and protein reserves in adult honey bees and pupae, and reproduce exclusively within sealed brood cells. Mites severely weaken the developing pupae, and their feeding introduces viruses.



*Photo by Gilles San Martin (flickr.com/photos/sanmartin).*



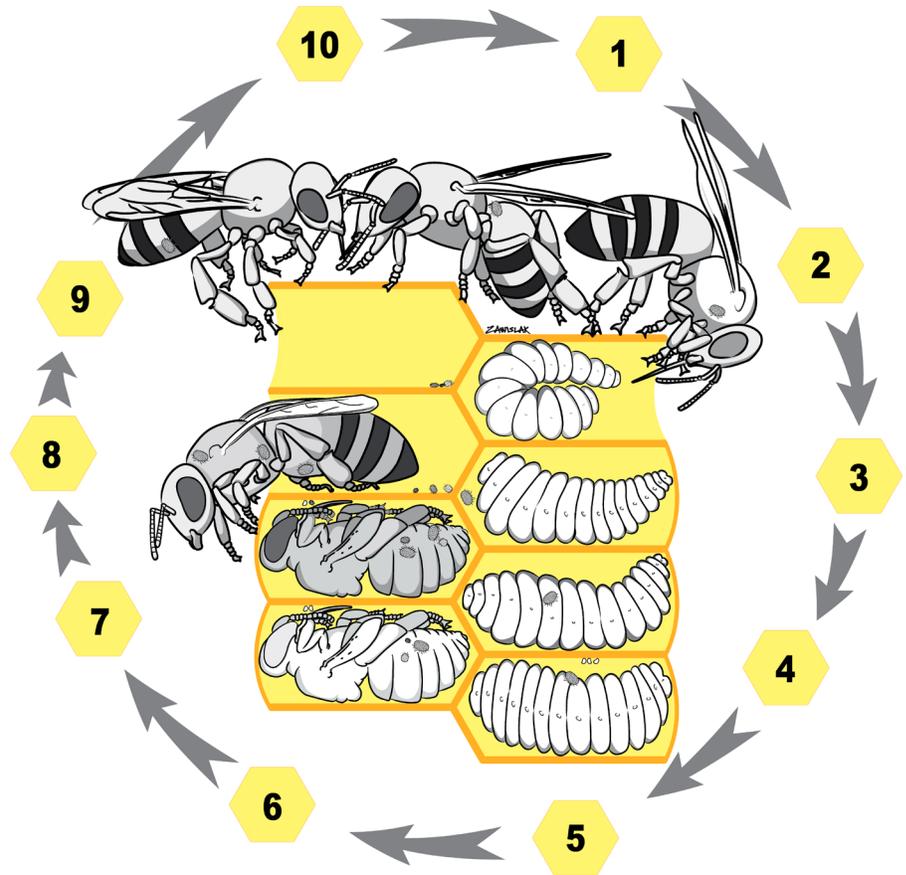
*Varroa mite on honey bee pupa. Photo by Gilles San Martin (flickr.com/photos/sanmartin).*



*Varroa mite on adult honey bee. Photo by Stephen Ausmus, USDA-ARS.*

## Life Cycle of Varroa

The life cycle of the Varroa mite has two phases. During the **phoretic phase**, mated female mites attach themselves to adult honey bees (1), and are carried through the hive. They are often found on nurse bees that remain in the brood nest, tending and feeding larvae (2). Phoretic mites must enter a honey bee brood cell to begin their **reproductive phase**. A mature female mite, called a foundress, enters a brood cell just prior its being capped (3). Once sealed inside, the mite opens a feeding wound on the bee pupa, often infecting it with viruses she carries (4). The foundress will soon begin laying eggs (5) of which the first is always male, followed by several female eggs over several days. Offspring hatch and mature, feeding on the same pupa, removing nutrients from the developing bee and picking up viruses that they can later vector to other bees (6). Mature sibling mites mate within the brood cell (7). When the adult bee emerges (8), the foundress is released along with her mature female offspring. Male mites and immature females remain in the cell to die (9) and will be removed by housecleaning bees. The male mite's entire life is spent in the capped cell. Mites that emerge will quickly seek a host bee (10), and may change hosts multiple times. Phoretic mites prefer middle-age nurse bees that tend late-stage brood, increasing opportunities to invade larval cells just prior to capping.



Varroa mites prefer drone brood to worker brood. Worker bees develop in 12 days, while drone cells remain capped for 15 days. This extra time allows mites higher reproductive potential when infesting drone cells. Varroa infesting worker brood have an average of 1.5 mature female offspring, while mites on drone brood average 2.5 viable daughters. Therefore, limiting excess drone comb within a hive can limit the population growth of varroa mites.

When brood is available, varroa typically spend 4-5 days in the phoretic stage before seeking a suitable cell for reproduction. Mites spend the majority of their lives in the reproductive phase, sealed protectively inside brood cells. However, most treatment options affect only the phoretic mites. Understanding the life cycle of the varroa mites is key for beekeepers to effectively treat hives and manage varroa infestations.

## Varroa Management Options

So-called **hard chemicals** were among the first successful treatments that U.S. beekeepers found when varroa first appeared in the late 1980s. Synthetic miticides such as pyrethroids and organophosphates act on the central nervous system of the mites. They were formulated for hive use by impregnating plastic strips with pesticides. Strips were placed between brood combs, and phoretic mites were killed as bees contacted the material.

These strips were convenient to apply and reasonably economical for beekeepers to use. However, over-use quickly led to resistant mites, which required more frequent or stronger treatments. Many miticides are also easily absorbed by beeswax with each repeated use. Not readily water-soluble, miticides will not easily leach into honey, but they do accumulate in the wax over time. Because bees and mites develop in beeswax cells, they are both potentially exposed to increasing levels of chemical contamination in older combs.

Bee health can be affected by this exposure, potentially impairing immune system response, shortening the lifespans of workers, and reducing fertility in queens and drones. Due to over-dependence on a narrow range of chemistry, populations of varroa are largely immune to some chemical treatments. Particularly, tau-fluvalinate (Apistan®) and coumaphos (Checkmite®) may no longer be effective treatments in some places. Products containing amitraz (Apivar®) remain effective at this time, but over-reliance on a single product will potentially render it ineffective as well. To prevent or delay resistance, beekeepers should rotate treatments each time they are required. By alternating products with different modes of action, pests are less able to rapidly develop tolerance than when a single product is used repeatedly.

When using any pesticide product, remember that ***the label is the law***. Read and follow all product directions, including the instructions for removing the product from the hive after a prescribed period of time. This period is often 42 days, or two brood cycles, which insures that mites sealed in brood cells will be exposed to a treatment product at least once during their brief phoretic phase. Following recommended timing insures the product is removed from the hive before it dissipates, exposing the mites to a weaker dose, which they are more likely to survive and pass on resistance traits to their offspring.

Due to problems associated with miticide use, many beekeepers are now choosing to treat colonies with **soft chemicals**, which include organic acids and essential plant oils. When used correctly these naturally-derived compounds can be effective against mites, with limited impact on bees. Many commercial products are available in convenient prepackaged doses. Be advised that many “natural” compounds can still be dangerous, or even deadly, to bees or to beekeepers when used improperly or at the wrong dose.

***Read and follow all product labels, and protect yourself with appropriate personal safety equipment!***

## Organic Acids

Some concentrated organic acids can effectively kill varroa, without significantly impacting bees or affecting the quality of honey. However, if not used properly, these can cause serious effects on bee health, including queen or brood mortality, or complete colony death.

**Formic acid** is highly effective at killing varroa mites. Available as a prepackaged gel formulation (Formic Pro®, Mite Away Quick Strip®), it is placed directly on top of the brood frames, and must volatilize in the hive. It is temperature dependent, and should be applied when the outside daytime temperature will remain between 50-92°F (10-33 C) for at least 5 days. If too cool, the product will not evaporate effectively, and if used when too warm, it will evaporate too rapidly and cause significant brood or queen mortality. Hives should not be opened for at least 72 hours after application. This product must be handled with **acid-resistant gloves** (not leather bee gloves) and applicator should wear an appropriate **respirator**. See product package for specific details. Formic acid is a natural component of honey, and is approved for use in certified organic production. The vapors are also capable of penetrating cell cappings, and is the only treatment known to kill varroa inside of sealed brood cells.

**Oxalic acid** is a naturally occurring compound in many plants that can be used to effectively and inexpensively treat for varroa mites. This compound affects only phoretic mites, and should not be applied when honey supers are on hives. Oxalic acid treatments can be applied to hives in two ways:

**Trickle method:** Dissolve 35 grams of oxalic acid crystals in 1 liter of warm 1:1 sugar syrup to make a 3.5% solution. Measure accurately, as a weak solution may not be effective; and a solution that is too strong can damage bees. Using a syringe, trickle or drench 5 ml (1 tsp) directly onto adult bees in each occupied space between brood combs. Do not use in honey supers. This method works best when bees are clustered in cool weather, and no brood is present. Avoid application to the same bees more than once per year. This method may not be appropriate for use in warm climates, where broodless periods are short. Oxalic acid becomes unstable in sugar solution, so unused material should be discarded.

**Vaporization method:** When heated, oxalic acid sublimates, going directly from solid to vapor. Numerous applicator devices are available to quickly treat bee hives. Prepare hives by removing any honey supers and sealing screen floors and other cracks in the hives. All burr comb should be removed from solid bottom boards to prevent fires when using an in-hive heater on the floor. Place 2 grams (1/2 teaspoon) oxalic acid crystals in the vaporizer device, insert the applicator into the flight entrance of the hive, cover the entrance with a towel and turn on the device. Follow the directions for your specific applicator. Honey supers can be replaced on the hive 20 minutes after application. Treatment is most effective when broodless, but application can be repeated after 2 weeks if brood is present.

**Hops Beta Acids** are derived from the hops plant (HopGuard 3®). Treated cardboard strips are placed over frames, and phoretic mites are killed as bees contact the material. Once strips have dried, bees will chew up and begin to remove them. Treatment should be repeated after two weeks. Product is made from food grade material, and can be used when honey supers are present, but works best when no brood is present for an extended period. Follow manufacturer's label directions.

## Essential Oils

A number of plant essential oils have acaricidal properties. Concentrated **thymol**, isolated from the thyme plant, is one of the most effective. It may be formulated with menthol, camphor, eucalyptus, wintergreen oil, or other ingredients in commercial products. These products must volatilize in the hive, and their effectiveness is temperature dependent. Each product formulation has its own specific recommended temperature range, which is typically between 65-85°F (18-30 C). Consult individual product labels for specific instructions.

In general, these products should be placed into hives for an initial treatment period, and then replaced approximately two weeks later with a second dose, to ensure that mites from multiple brood cycles are exposed. Products may be available in pre-measured doses or in bulk quantities. Some commercially available essential oil products include Apiguard®, Thymovar®, and ApilifeVar®.

Read and follow the specific manufacturer's directions or each product package for best results. Note that some essential oils can be toxic to honey bees, and experimentation with non-commercial mixtures is done at the beekeeper's own risk to the hive. Volatile essential oils should never be applied to a colony while honey supers are in place because the quality and value of the honey can be severely affected.

## Genetic Mite Resistance

European honey bees have not had a sufficiently long association with varroa mites to develop a stable host-parasite relationship to better withstand this novel pest on their own. Some genetic lines of bees have begun to show resistance to varroa, and queen producers have had some success with breeding these traits into commercially available bee stock. **Russian honey bees** reduce varroa populations by vigorously grooming mites from themselves and nest mates. Some bees may exhibit **varroa sensitive hygienic** (VSH) behavior by detecting reproducing mites in capped brood cells, and then removing both pupae and mites and disrupting mite reproduction.

Other lines of bees may also demonstrate various mechanisms for mite resistance, but honey bee queens and drones mate in the air at random, far from their hives. This behavior can make maintaining specific genetic traits difficult in areas crowded with other beekeepers' hives of unselected stock. Precise control of genetics is only possible through instrumental insemination, which is too costly and labor intensive to be practical for most hobbyists. When a colony swarms or supersedes, the genetic composition of the hive changes, and desirable genetic traits can be potentially lost or minimized. However, if bee swarms establish as feral colonies, their progeny of strong survivor stock may eventually repopulate wild areas with bees that carry beneficial combinations of genetic traits, and begin to reverse the severe losses caused by varroa mites. These survivors can also serve as healthy sources of drones for managed queens.

While these genetic stocks can reduce the frequency of mite treatments, there are not yet any lines of bees available that demonstrate 100% resistance to varroa mites. Beekeepers should monitor their colonies during the season and remain aware of the mite population levels.

## Drone Brood Trapping

Varroa mites appear to prefer reproducing on drone brood over worker brood. Beekeepers can use this behavior to trap and remove mites from the hive without chemical treatments by placing drone-sized foundation into a hive. Drone foundation is available from commercial suppliers. The cell pattern on this foundation is slightly larger than standard worker-sized foundation, and the colony will draw comb with larger diameter cells into which the queen will place only unfertilized drone eggs. Beekeepers can also purchase a single-piece plastic frame and foundation combination, which is often colored green to make it easily identifiable.

When a majority of these drone cells are capped, but before adult drones begin to emerge, the entire comb should be removed from the hive and frozen for 3-5 days. This kills both the drone pupae and the mites hiding in their cells.

After the frame has thawed, it can be placed back in the hive. Worker bees will uncap and remove the dead pupae and mites, and prepare the cells for the queen to deposit eggs again. Some beekeepers will use two such frames, which can be swapped out as needed.

In the photo below, there are 860 sealed cells on this side of the comb. If we assume that the other side contains about the same amount of sealed brood, and a foundress mite can produce an average of 2.5 viable daughters per cell, then this frame could potentially hold over 6,000 mites that can be removed without chemicals. Even if only half of these cells contain reproducing varroa, there is still potential to easily eliminate a large number of mites. However, if beekeepers fail to remove these combs as intended, the drones will emerge and release their mites, increasing the mite population far more than if drone combs had not been employed. A good rule of thumb is to swap and freeze drone frames every 21 days during the brood rearing season.



*Trapping and killing varroa mites in a drone comb frame such as this one can help to reduce the mite population without the use of chemical treatments in the hive. However, if drones are not removed on a regular schedule, the presence of extra drone brood will likely increase the varroa population.*

## Sampling for Varroa Mites

To maintain colony health, varroa populations should be kept below a 3% infestation rate, or fewer than 3 mites per 100 bees. Sampling for mites is not difficult, and numerous methods have been developed for beekeepers to use. For an accurate estimate, count the number of mites in a sample of at least 300 bees (about 1/2 cup). Adult bees should be collected from combs containing open brood, as these nurse bees are most likely to carry phoretic mites. When sampling bees, be sure to avoid the queen!

Bees can be brushed or shaken into a tub, and then a measuring cup can be used to scoop out the appropriate number of bees for a sample. A jar or other container can also be marked to show 1/2 cup, and bees can be sampled directly into it. Hold a comb covered in bees vertically above the hive, and gently move the jar down, barely touching the backs of bees. Many will flip over into the container as it brushes past them. Tap the bottom of the jar to knock the bees down and estimate if additional bees will be needed.

Once mites are counted, divide the number of mites by the number of bees in the sample, then multiply by 100 to determine the infestation level. Varroa estimates are often expressed in terms of *mites per 100 bees*.

***example:***

**9 mites ÷ 300 bees × 100% = 3% infestation  
or 3 mites per 100 bees**



*Honey bees can be sampled directly into a jar to determine the mite infestation level. About 300 bees are needed for an accurate sample. Photo by Sheri Burns (honeybeesonline.com)*

## Alcohol Wash

Washing bees with alcohol is the most accurate method to determine varroa infestation level. Shake bees in alcohol for a minute or more to dislodge mites, then pour the liquid through a mesh screen to separate mites from bees. Liquid is then poured through a fine sieve or white cloth, or into a white tub to make mites visible. For a precise count, bees can be washed again with water until no additional mites are dislodged, but this may be unnecessary if the threshold is clearly exceeded. Commercially available tools make this technique quick and easy to conduct. Effective tools can also be made from simple materials on hand.

Because it is among the most reliable ways to determine varroa infestation level, washing mites from a sample of bees with alcohol is a standard method in scientific research. However, the method is fatal for the honey bees sampled, and many hobbyists don't enjoy the idea of killing hundreds of their honey bees. For this reason, several other sampling methods, which do not harm the bees, are available for beekeepers to use.

In reality, individual honey bees are short lived, and healthy colonies are quite populous. If a colony is so weak as to be significantly endangered by the loss of 300 workers, the future of that colony may be at risk anyway.

*Tools for sampling varroa mites by alcohol wash include commercially available devices, such as the Varroa EasyCheck® (left), Varroa Sampling Gizmo® (middle) and a homemade device (right).*



*Photo courtesy Vêto-Pharma  
(vetopharma.com)*



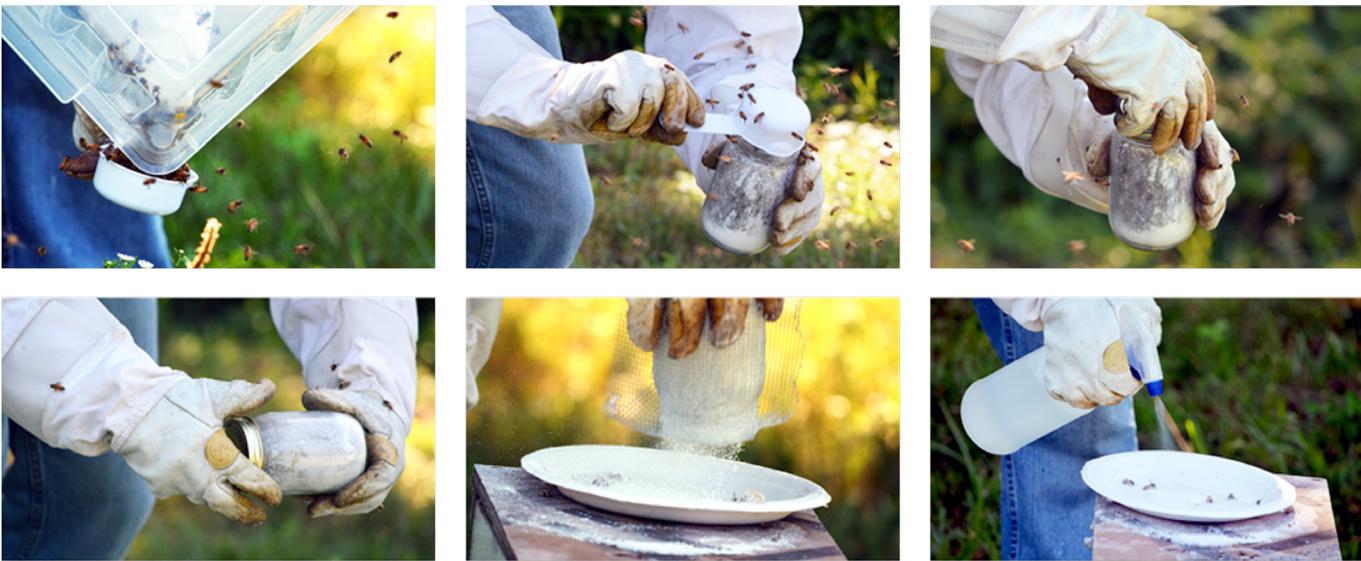
*Photo courtesy Kelley Beekeeping  
(kelleybees.com)*



*Photo courtesy Randy Oliver  
(scientificbeekeeping.com)*

## Sugar Shake

A wide-mouth canning jar can be modified by replacing the lid with a circle of 1/8" mesh. Mark the jar at the 1/2 cup level with a permanent marker. Once sufficient bees have been added to the jar, screw on the lid, and add ~2 tablespoons of powdered sugar through the screen lid. Gently roll the jar for about 1 minute to thoroughly coat every bee with sugar, then invert the jar and thoroughly shake out all sugar into another container (usually 1-2 minutes). Varroa are unable to hold onto bees when coated with dust, and the sugar will induce vigorous grooming from the bees, further dislodging mites. Dark colored mites are clearly visible in the white sugar. While not quite as reliable as alcohol wash, sugar generally recovers 80-90% of mites. Extremely humid weather can cause the sugar to clump, making the test less accurate. Beekeepers should be aware of these considerations when making their assessments. Bees survive this treatment (although they will not be pleased) and can be returned to the hive.



Photos courtesy Brushy Mountain Bee Farm (brushymountainbeefarm.com)

## CO<sub>2</sub> Sampling

Carbon dioxide is commonly used to anesthetize queen bees for instrumental insemination. It can also be used to quickly knock out a sample of bees and phoretic mites, which can be shaken through a screen to be counted.

This treatment should not harm bees, but they often expel their stomach contents, making the bees and container sticky, so some mites may remain and not be counted. Therefore, when making colony assessments beekeepers should consider that this method may dislodge only about 60-70% of the mites.



Photo courtesy Daniel Ruck (www.Bienen-Ruck.de)



## Sticky Boards

Some phoretic varroa mites fall from bees on a daily basis. A cardboard or plastic sheet, coated with a sticky or greasy substance, can be placed beneath a hive's screen floor to capture and count the number of mites falling, and indicate their relative population.

Sticky boards cannot estimate an accurate level of mite infestation, since the number of bees cannot be accurately counted with this method. But it can be used to track changes in mite population growth in the same hive over time, so that a beekeeper can be aware if the mite level is increasing from month to month. Sticky boards can also be used to evaluate the immediate knock-down effect of a particular mite treatment.

Sheets of light colored corrugated plastic board work well, and a printed grid makes counting mites easier. Leave the board in place for 3 days for an accurate sample, remove and count all visible mites, then divide by the number of days sampled to determine the **average mite-fall per day**. In the spring, the threshold for varroa should be much lower than in the fall, but the specific number is highly variable with the honey bee population. In early spring, fewer than 3 mites per day may be acceptable. In the late summer, finding more than 30 mites per day will likely prompt treatment.

## Screen Bottom Boards



Using 1/8" screen for the floor of a bee hive can help to passively eliminate some mites continually throughout the season. As phoretic mites are dislodged, they fall through the screen and are unable to climb back into the brood nest. This may be particularly effective with genetic lines of bees that aggressively groom mites from themselves and their nest mates. While this modification will not eliminate all varroa, it can reduce mite reproduction and may delay their build-up as part of an overall IPM strategy.

## Tracheal Mites

The tracheal mite (*Acarapis woodi*) is an internal parasite of honey bees. They infest and breed in the tracheal tubes (breathing passages) within the bees' bodies. These mites feed directly through the tracheal walls on a host's hemolymph (blood), causing damage, potentially vectoring diseases, and impairing the host's breathing. Young mites must disperse to find new hosts younger than 3 days old to infest. The short-lived bees of spring and summer can only host a single generation of mites, but long-lived overwintering bees can host multiple generations within each bee. For this reason, tracheal mites are generally associated with winter losses, especially when colonies are under additional stress. Common symptoms of tracheal mite infestation are nonspecific, but include **K-wing**, and generally weakened or dwindling hives. A microscopic examination of the tracheal tubes is needed for precise diagnosis. Some lines of bees have been bred with good genetic resistance to this pest. Formic acid treatment, menthol (Mite-A-Thol®) or any of the essential oil products used against varroa should also help to control tracheal mites, since bees breathe in these vapors for an extended period. Oxalic acid, however, does not remain in the vapor state long enough to affect tracheal mites.

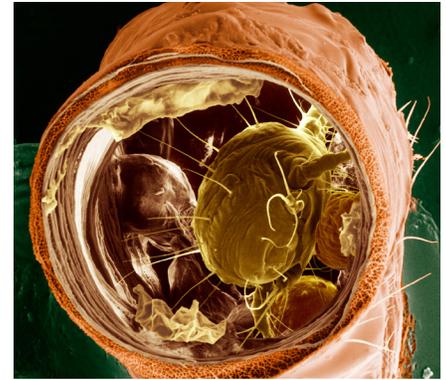


Photo by Ron Ochoa & Gary Baughan, USDA-ARS.

## Tropilaelaps Mites

Two species of *Tropilaelaps* mites found on Asian honey bees can also infest European honey bees. These mites will feed and reproduce on both worker and drone pupae, can vector pathogens, and cause damage to colonies similar to that of varroa mites. While their life cycle is similar to varroa, *Tropilaelaps* have a much faster reproductive rate, and can quickly overwhelm colonies during the brood-rearing season. They may be observed running rapidly across the comb, rather than remaining phoretic on adult bees.

These tropical mites are unable to feed on adult bees, and appear able to survive for only three days with no brood in the laboratory. Therefore they may be unable to establish in much of the United States where winter conditions create an extended broodless period. However, if these mites are able to adapt and feed on alternate hosts, the extent of their potential range cannot be known.

These mites are not currently found in North America, but with increasingly rapid global trade, *Tropilaelaps* may be accidentally introduced here, as have many other harmful species. Beekeepers should be aware of this potential pest, and immediately report its suspected presence to their state entomologists or apiaary inspectors.



Comparison of size between a varroa mite (left) and a *Tropilaelaps* mite (right). Photo courtesy UK Food and Environment Research Agency (FERA), Crown Copyright.

## Small Hive Beetles

*Aethina tumida*, the small hive beetle (SHB) originally from sub-Saharan Africa, has become invasive in many other parts of the world where European honey bees are kept. Adult beetles are about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " long and dark reddish brown in color. They are small enough to often evade guard bees and enter hives.

As long as the colony is healthy and the honey bee population is strong, SHB adults do not cause damage, but mainly constitute a nuisance to the bees. Beetles avoid bees by hiding in inaccessible niches in the hive, and depositing eggs in cracks and crevices. A strong bee colony can usually remove limited eggs or beetle larvae, but if the bee population is insufficient, beetle larvae can quickly overwhelm the hive. This can be due to a gradual or sudden reduction in bees because of diseases, mites, queenlessness, swarming, or beekeeper manipulations such as colony splits.

Hive beetle larvae are scavengers, feeding on pollen, honey bee brood, or even their own dead. When feeding on honey, beetles introduce a yeast that causes honey to ferment and run out of cells, and the colony is referred to as "slimed." A high level of slime in a heavily infested colony may cause the remaining bees to abscond and completely abandon the hive. The odor of fermenting honey signals that the colony is weak, attracting more adult beetles from outside.

Beetle larvae can also be destructive pests of the honey house, where combs are stored for extraction, and no longer protected by bees. Under ideal conditions, larvae can hatch from eggs in untended supers and ruin a honey crop within just a few days. Honey should be extracted within a two days of removing it from the hive, and wet cappings should be covered or frozen until they can be processed.



*Small hive beetle adults are easily recognized.*  
Photo by Jessica Louque, Smithers Viscient (bugwood.org)



*Beetle larvae have well-developed legs and rows of spines. They may be too small to notice until they have become a serious problem.* Photo courtesy Pest and Diseases Image Library (bugwood.org).

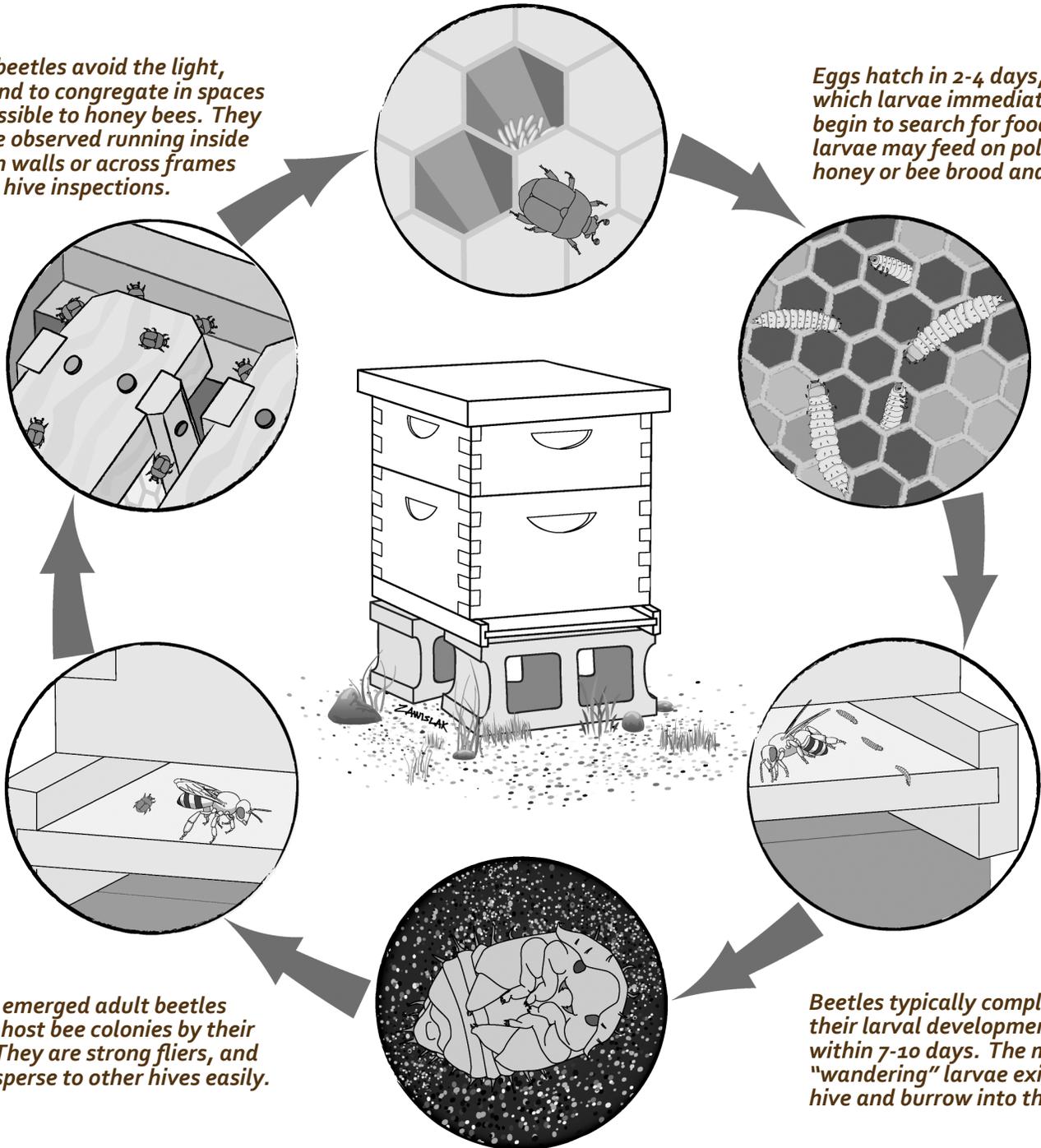


*Beetle larvae on a "slimed" honey comb.*  
Photo by James D. Ellis, University of Florida (bugwood.org).

*Female beetles deposit masses of eggs in crevices around the hive, or directly on pollen or brood combs. Beetles may puncture the wall or capping of a sealed cell and deposit eggs inside.*

*Adult beetles avoid the light, and tend to congregate in spaces inaccessible to honey bees. They may be observed running inside lids, on walls or across frames during hive inspections.*

*Eggs hatch in 2-4 days, after which larvae immediately begin to search for food. The larvae may feed on pollen, honey or bee brood and eggs.*



*Newly emerged adult beetles locate host bee colonies by their odor. They are strong fliers, and can disperse to other hives easily.*

*Beetles typically complete their larval development within 7-10 days. The mature "wandering" larvae exit the hive and burrow into the soil.*

*Beetle larvae pupate in the top 4" of soil, on average. Pupation takes 3-6 weeks to complete, depending on temperature and soil moisture.*

If bees do not consume pollen patties rapidly, SHB will readily utilize this food for oviposition. Do not add protein supplements to hives that will not immediately eat them. Any patty found to contain SHB larvae should be removed and discarded immediately.

Beetle larvae feed for 7-10 days, then exit the hive to pupate in the top 4" of soil. Pupation takes 3-6 weeks, depending on soil moisture and temperature. Newly emerged adults locate hives by odor. They are strong fliers and can easily disperse to seek new hives. The best defense against SHB is strong colonies, which reduce mating and oviposition by adult beetles.

Physical or mechanical traps and barriers can be used to reduce the population of adult beetles in the hive, and limit their reproduction. Many types of traps are available that fit inside a hive, or may modify or replace parts of the hive itself. No traps completely eliminate all SHB, but they can be used as part of an overall IPM strategy.

Physical barriers (Beetle Jail Entrance Trap®, Beetle Baffle®) can exclude or reduce the number of beetles that enter a hive while allowing bees to pass freely. These devices do not remove or restrict SHBs that are already inside. Beetles are able to fly, even in the hive, and can bypass some barriers. Also, they are only effective if the rest of the hive is in good repair, without gaps or cracks that allow beetles to enter above the barrier.

Many traps take advantage of the beetles' instinct to hide from bees inside the hive, causing them to drown in oil or soapy water. Vegetable oil must be changed periodically, or it becomes rancid; mineral oil lasts longer, but is more costly. Soap or detergent is added to water to break the surface tension of the water and ensure that SHB sink and drown.

Adult beetles can fit through the standard 1/8" mesh in a screen bottom board. Placing a tray below this screen, filled with oil or soapy water, can trap and kill SHB. These trays will collect dropped pollen and other debris from the hive, as well as dead beetles, and should be cleaned out regularly. If soapy water is used, it can evaporate quickly in hot weather, and if not replaced, the debris in the dry tray can quickly become a source of food and a breeding ground for additional small hive beetle larvae.



*Oil trays beneath hives can be effective traps when used properly. If allowed to accumulate pollen and debris, empty trays can become convenient feeding and breeding sites for more small hive beetles inside of the hive.*

Numerous traps fit between frames and have openings that permit SHB, but are too small to for bees (AJ's Beetle Eater®, Beetle Blaster®, Beetle Jail Baitable®). Adult hive beetles enter these traps to hide from bees, and drown. Some designs also have a compartment to hold a bait, such as apple cider vinegar, which mimics the attractive odor of fermenting honey.



*This trap fits over the top of a frame, and has openings that permit adult beetles to enter, but excludes bees. It is filled with oil to kill beetles, and has a compartment for an attractant, such as apple cider vinegar.*

If a hive has been overrun by SHB larvae, beekeepers may treat the soil beneath and around their bee hives with permethrin (GuardStar®) to prevent pupating SHB from emerging to infest additional hives. If necessary, mow ground cover and remove water sources around hives prior to treatment. Mix product according to label instructions and apply in late evening when few bees are active. Thoroughly drench soil 18-24" in front of hives with a sprinkler can. Never use a pressurized sprayer, and avoid product contact with bee hive equipment.

Some species of **entomopathogenic nematodes**, such as *Heterorhabditis indica* and *Steinernema carpocapsae*, are commercially available and may help suppress SHB populations by killing pupae before they emerge from the soil. Mix the nematode substrate with water and apply directly to soil beneath and around hives. Success depends on soil type and moisture, as well as a consistent supply of beetle pupae to support the living nematode population. In general, soils that best support SHB development will likely support nematodes. While conclusive research is lacking on how well nematodes persist through extremely dry or cold periods in different climates, and how often they should be reapplied to soil, they can be used as a component of an overall IPM approach.

## Wax Moths & Wax Worms

Two pests, the **Greater Wax Moth** (*Galleria mellonella*) and the **Lesser Wax Moth** (*Achroia grisella*) are ubiquitous, opportunistic pests. They may be found infesting weak or dwindling bee hives, and can be particular problems in stored combs. Both of these species have similar habits, and management recommendations are the same for both.



*The Greater Wax Moth, *Galleria mellonella* (left), and the Lesser Wax Moth, *Achroia grisella* (right) are both destructive pests found in weak hives and stored combs. Photos by Ben Sale ([flickr.com/photos/33398884@N03](https://www.flickr.com/photos/33398884@N03/))*

Female moths deposit clusters of eggs within crevices in the hive. Eggs can hatch within in a few days, depending on temperature conditions. The larval stage, known as a **wax worm** or **web worm**, is the actively destructive form. Larvae burrow through comb, consuming and destroying beeswax, and spinning silk webbing, which is thought to protect the larvae from honey bees. Dark, older combs containing multiple layers of discarded bee cocoons are most attractive to the wax worms. Combs that have only been used for honey storage are much less attractive to wax worms, but it will still be consumed when infestations are large.



*Damage to comb caused by wax worms.  
Photo by Rob Snyder (beeinformed.org).*

Larvae feed for 6-7 weeks, molting 7 times as they grow up to 1" long. In the final stage they chew out a niche in the wall of the hive or a wooden frame, and spin a protective cocoon for pupation. Cocoons are often found in dense clusters. Pupation time varies with season and temperature, from 6 days to several weeks. Moths do not feed in the adult stage, and live a few days to several weeks. Mating occurs soon after adult emergence, with a single female capable of producing up to 2,000 eggs in her lifetime.

The best defense against wax moths is to keep bee colonies strong, healthy and queenright. Well-maintained hives, without cracks or holes, and full of bees will best keep out pests such as wax moths.

A strong colony will actively kill and remove individual *Galleria* adults and larvae. A symptom known as **bald brood** is sometimes observed, when a wax worm has been detected tunneling through the sealed brood cells, and worker bees uncap cells in a straight line, seeking to remove the caterpillar. These cells are typically not re-capped, but pupae inside should continue to develop and emerge normally.

If found in a weak colony, the supers containing moths and caterpillars can be frozen 48-72 hours to kill them. If damage is not severe, the hive body can be placed onto a strong, active colony for the bees to clean and repair combs. If damage is severe, use a hive tool to scrape and clean all damaged frames and boxes, and replace with new foundation. Caterpillars will rarely damage plastic foundation, which can be cleaned and coated with fresh beeswax and reused. Damage to frames or woodenware can be so extensive that it cannot be reused. Drawn combs that have been removed from hives for storage are particularly vulnerable to wax moth damage. If undetected, the progeny from a single female moth can destroy countless boxes of comb. Moths usually avoid comb stored in areas with plenty of sunlight and air circulation, however, this is not always practical for the beekeeper. Boxes of combs can be preserved by freezing or fumigation.

If space is available, entire boxes of drawn combs can be frozen indefinitely. Prior to freezing, boxes can be placed in large plastic trash bags to capture debris, but should not remain sealed in plastic if removed from the freezer, because trapped moisture will promote the growth of mold. Combs containing pollen or honey should be kept frozen or placed into an active colony, or they risk becoming infested with small hive beetles, ants, and other insects that readily feed on this rich source of food.

Because brood combs are far more attractive to wax worms, beekeepers should make efforts to prevent the queen from laying eggs in honey supers. This will reduce the amount of pollen stored there, and prevent a build-up of cast skins and cocoons that attract the *Galleria* moths. Newly drawn comb that has only been used for honey storage is not nearly as attractive.

Chemical **fumigation** can be used to kill both moths and larvae, and to protect stored combs, but cannot be used on colonies with live bees, nor should it be used with combs full of honey. Stack up to 5 “deep” or 10 “medium” supers vertically, on a thick pad of newspapers, and seal cracks between boxes with masking tape. Place a piece of paper or cardboard above the frames of the topmost super, sprinkle 3 ounces (4 tablespoons) of paradichlorobenzene crystals (PDB), sold as Para-Moth® or Enoz Moth Ice Crystals®, onto the paper, and closed with a standard bee hive lid.

***Moth crystals are not the same as moth balls, which should never be used in beekeeping!***

PDB fumes are heavier than air, and will fill the entire stack, killing all stages of caterpillars, and will repel adult moths from entering stored equipment. Use only in a well-ventilated area. Apply to clean, dry supers after honey has been extracted. Never apply to combs containing honey. In warm weather, inspect the stack every 2-3 weeks to ensure that some crystals remain, adding more product if necessary. Wax moths are generally only active during warmer months, and are rarely a problem after the first hard freeze, as long as temperatures remain low. In the spring, moth activity is usually negligible. Unstack all equipment and allow it to air out for 2 weeks prior to use on bee hives.

Another fumigant, aluminum phosphide (Phostoxin®) can also be used to protect stored products, including drawn combs. It is highly effective at killing pests, but also extremely hazardous to humans, and is therefore a restricted pesticide, available for purchase and use only by licensed applicators. Users must read and follow all labels directions carefully!

## **Ants**

While ants can be a common nuisance to beekeepers, few species are destructive pests. They occasionally nest in hive equipment, and may feed on honey or in syrup feeders. Keep hives elevated from the ground, away from contact with the soil. If possible, place hives on a stand with legs, and keep the legs in pool of water or oil. Ants will be unable to cross this moat to enter the hive. Alternately, coat legs of hive stands with petroleum jelly, which will also prevent ants from climbing up. Keep vegetation trimmed down so that ants cannot climb onto hives from tall grass or weeds.

## Mice

Rodents will shelter in empty hive equipment, and can destroy combs when they build a nest, as well as bring in debris and leave their droppings. Mice may also nest inside of an occupied hive when bees remain clustered during cold weather. Elevate bee hives from the ground and restrict the size of the opening to discourage mice from entering. Mouse guards are available commercially or can be crafted by beekeepers. Mouse guards should be installed before temperatures fall below 57° and bees begin to cluster, to avoid trapping a mouse inside the hive.



*Photo courtesy Brett Kozma, B&K Bees (bkbees.com)*



*Photo courtesy Chinook Honey Company (chinookhoney.com)*

## Skunks

Skunks visit bee hives at night, where they will repeatedly scratch at the entrance of the hive. The disturbance draws out a few guard bees at a time, which are eaten. Skunks learn to avoid strong hives, and may return nightly to feed. Some beekeepers construct wire barriers across the entrance of hives, to prevent skunks from reaching the entrance. A length of carpet tack strip across the end of the landing board should keep unwanted paws away from the entrance. Raising hives off the ground also helps keep them out of easy reach of small mammals.

## Bears

The largest and most destructive pest of bee hives are bears. These large animals will feed on honey, but protein-rich brood is their preferred food. A curious bear will usually approach at night, knock hives over, and drag or carry frames of food away from the stinging bees to eat. Once they have successfully fed, bears will often return to the same apiary again, causing additional damage.



*Photo by Terry Spivey, USDA Forest Service (bugwood.org)*

While expensive to install, electric fences are the most effective method to prevent bears from destroying an apiary. Electric fences must be installed and maintained correctly to be effective. Wrapping an electrified wire with raw bacon will entice a curious bear to investigate it, rather than the bee hives inside, and a single shock may be enough to convince a bear to avoid the fenced area completely. State wildlife officials may be able to trap and relocate bears that have become accustomed to people or bee hives.



*An apiary damaged by bears. Photo courtesy Janet A. Katz.*

### **Sacbrood**

Caused by a common bee viruses, sacbrood disease affects honey bee species around the world. Infected nurse bees likely pass the virus to larvae in brood food. Infected larvae fail to pupate after cells are capped, and remain on their backs in a distinct “canoe” posture. Larvae observed in uncapped cells may appear to have an abnormally small head, curved up, and changing color from gray to light brown then dark brown. Adult bees will remove dead larvae, which may spread the disease. If not removed, larvae dry out and adhere to the cell. If pulled from the cell with forceps, the larva will often appear as a bag of liquid, with one end a dark color. Adult bees exhibit no overt symptoms, although high viral levels may contribute to shorter lifespans and overall colony weakening.

Sacbrood is usually observed in spring colonies with a poor brood pattern. Symptoms may disappear in time, but can recur. No practical cure exists to treat honey bee viruses. Caging the queen for 2 weeks can break the transmission cycle to young bees. However, requeening the colony will usually clear up the infection by breaking the brood cycle and introducing new genetic stock, which may be more resistant.



*Photo by Jon Zawislak*



*Photo by Michael E. Wilson*

*Larvae with characteristic symptoms of sacbrood virus. Infected larvae may be noticed in cells that have been chewed open because they failed to pupate.*

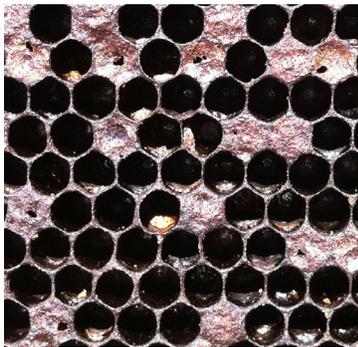
## American Foulbrood

American Foulbrood is caused by the bacteria *Paenibacillus larvae*, and is perhaps the most serious and lethal condition that can infect an apiary. Uncontrolled, it spreads easily to other hives, killing an entire apiary as weakened hives are robbed by stronger ones. The infection is caused by bacterial spores that are highly resistant to extremes of heat or cold, and can persist on old combs and woodenware for many decades. For this reason, it is unwise to use old beekeeping equipment with an unknown history. Only honey bee larvae are susceptible to AFB, while adult bees are immune. Nurse bees contaminate the larval food with bacteria, and larvae die soon after cells are capped.

AFB has distinct symptoms that can be recognized early. Capped brood cells may appear sunken, with perforated cappings. Also, the brood pattern appears spotty, rather than uniform. Dead larvae appear greasy and discolored at first, then darken as they decompose. These larval "scales" adhere to the bottoms of the cells, and are difficult for bees to remove. This disease is accompanied by a very unpleasant odor, for which it was named.

If American foulbrood is suspected, beekeepers can conduct a quick "ropiness" test in the field by inserting a toothpick or twig into a cell with a dead larva and stirring the tissue. When the toothpick is withdrawn, if the mixture strings out up to 3/4" before snapping back into the cell, it is very likely infected with AFB. Beekeepers should immediately contact their state apiary inspector to report the suspected presence of this disease, and follow all recommendations. An inspector will be able to confirm the diagnosis before taking further action.

There is no medical cure for American foulbrood, and most states' laws require that infected colonies be destroyed and burned on site. While unfortunate, this is often the only practical way to prevent the disease from recurring or spreading to other hives. Other colonies in the apiary not showing symptoms should be placed under quarantine and reinspected at a later date. Feeding colonies a preemptive dose of antibiotics does not cure or prevent American foulbrood disease, but merely hides its symptoms.



*Sunken, perforated cappings and darkened scales on the bottoms of the cells are all symptoms of AFB infections. Photo by Jon Zawislak (uaex.edu/bees).*



*The "ropiness" test can be used in the field to quickly diagnose a case of American foulbrood. Any suspected case should be reported to a local apiary inspector. Photo by Virginia Williams, USDA-ARS.*



*Burning infected hives is the only practical solution to prevent the spread of AFB and is required by law in most states. Photo by Richard Underhill (peacebeefarm.blogspot.com).*

## European Foulbrood

European Foulbrood is caused by the bacteria *Melissococcus plutonius*. While not as serious as AFB, EFB is still very contagious and can be a serious threat. This pathogen is often present in seemingly healthy hives at a latent level, but becomes apparent only when colonies are under stress. It is most common in the critical period after winter when colonies contain many older bees, and are building up their populations at a time when weather is unpredictable and forage is not yet abundant. European foulbrood affects only younger larvae, when nurse bees accidentally contaminate brood food with the bacteria.

Infected larvae die before cells are capped, so the disease can be detected by inspecting the brood nest. The most obvious symptom is a spotty brood pattern, although this may not yet be apparent if the infection is at an early stage. Look carefully in individual open brood cells for discolored or deformed larvae. Infected larvae may appear off-white, yellow, brown or gray, possibly with tracheal tubes visible beneath the skin. Larvae may appear twisted or curled, or even melted down. A sour odor may or may not be apparent, depending on the progress of the disease. Dead larvae form a rubbery scale which worker bees can remove, but may not be able to keep up with a heavily-infected colony.

Brood infected with European foulbrood does not rope out when probed with a toothpick, as with AFB. It is important that beekeepers are able to recognize the difference in symptoms, because EFB-infected colonies do not need to be immediately destroyed, as with AFB.

Because EFB does not form long-lasting resistant spores, it is possible for a colony to recover from a mild infection. Antibiotics were traditionally used to successfully treat and control EFB, but the over-use of antibiotics in the animal industry has resulted in a federal law that now requires a licensed veterinarian to prescribe their use, even for beekeepers. It can be difficult to find a veterinarian able to immediately examine colonies, confirm the diagnosis, and prescribe medication as soon as EFB is discovered. Beekeepers can usually intervene to save their colony without the application of antibiotics by using the "shook swarm" technique.



*Visible symptoms of EFB infection include larvae that are discolored, twisted in their cells or appear to be melting down. These larvae will die before the cell is capped, and can be successfully removed by worker bees. Breaking the brood cycle helps to stop the cycle of disease transmission to susceptible larvae. Photos by Michael E. Wilson (beeinformed.org).*

Cage or remove the queen for 2 weeks to break the brood cycle and prevent transmission of the disease to a new generation of susceptible larvae. During this broodless period, shake all adult bees onto new foundation in a clean hive, discard all brood combs (which serve as bacterial reservoirs), and feed the colony heavily with syrup. The syrup provides the worker bees with food and resources to draw new comb on the foundation. When the queen begins laying again, the disease should not recur. Replacing the queen during this period may also be beneficial, because a young queen is typically more prolific, and the new genetic stock may be more resistant to EFB. The use of antibiotics with this method described here may help to reduce the likelihood of a recurring infection. Applying antibiotics without discarding contaminated brood combs can rid the colony of symptoms, but the disease may recur later.

## Chalkbrood

A condition known as chalkbrood disease is caused by a fungal pathogen, *Ascosphaera apis*, affecting larvae that have consumed spores. Infected larvae starve as the fungus grows within them and competes with the larvae for food. Dead larvae swell to fill their cells, and are quickly overgrown with fluffy fungal mycelia. The fungus produces spores, giving the dead larva a characteristic “chalky” look. These larvae, called mummies, may be found in capped or open cells, or on the bottom board, but are usually first noticed on the landing board after they have been removed by housecleaning bees. Mummies may appear white, gray, green, black, or a mixture of colors, as multiple other fungi tend to quickly grow on dead brood. This disease should not be confused with common molds, which readily grow on stored pollen if a colony dies during winter and remains unnoticed for a while.

There is no medication to treat for chalkbrood. It is most common in the early spring, and disappears when weather becomes warmer and drier, and as the queen increases spring brood production. Hygienic bees remove infected mummies, although this action can result in spreading spores throughout the brood area. A strong colony with abundant workers will be able to keep the brood nest cleaner. Also, a well-ventilated hive, elevated above the ground and free of excess moisture, can help prevent fungal growth. If this condition persists or recurs each year, beekeepers should thoroughly scrape and clean woodenware, replace old brood combs with new foundation, and sterilize hive tools.



Photo by Rob Snyder ([beeinformed.org](http://beeinformed.org)).



Photo by Jeff Pettis, USDA-ARS.

*Chalkbrood mummies may be observed in brood cells (left) but are often first noticed on the landing board after housecleaning bees have begun removing them from the hive (right). There is no medical cure for chalkbrood.*

## Stonebrood

Another brood disease, stonebrood, is caused by several species of *Aspergillus* fungi. These soil-dwelling microbes are common insect pathogens, but good nutrition and overall colony health reduce physiological stress on bees and reduce the chance of infection from this and other microbes. The infection can grow rapidly, with an early symptom being a yellowish ring near the head end of the infected larva. Mummified larvae become coated with a film of yellow, green or black spores (depending on the fungal species), and become very hard and difficult to crush. Mummies may be found on the bottom board or at the hive entrance, similar to chalkbrood.

This disease is fairly rare, and the treatment for it is similar to **chalkbrood**. However, these fungal spores can cause respiratory infections in mammals, including humans, and combs from severely infected colonies should be carefully destroyed by burning.

## Black Queen Cell Virus

This disease affects only developing queens, killing them after their cells are sealed. Unable to complete pupation, they appear similar to sacbrood-infected workers, initially turning yellow with a tough skin, then becoming significantly darker in color. After the pupating queen dies, the wall of the wax cell may appear dark and oily, indicating pupal mortality.

This virus is found world-wide, and is likely common at latent levels in many colonies. However, the condition is rarely seen outside of queen breeding operations that raise many queen cells from the same colonies. Workers and drones can carry infections, but do not develop visible clinical symptoms. The virus is likely transmitted from to queen larvae via the workers' brood food glands, and it may be that the accumulation of abundant royal jelly from multiple infected nurse bees concentrates virus particles in the food which the queen larvae consume. BQCV has often been found in association with high levels of nosema, but a specific correlation is not clear. Viral incidence usually peaks in the early spring, when demand for queen production is very high, and hives may also still contain a large number of older overwintered bees, which tend to harbor more nosema spores. This virus has also been isolated from queen bees' ovaries, and may be transmitted from infected queen to her offspring. While BQCV has also been detected in varroa mites, these parasites are not believed to be an important vector of the disease

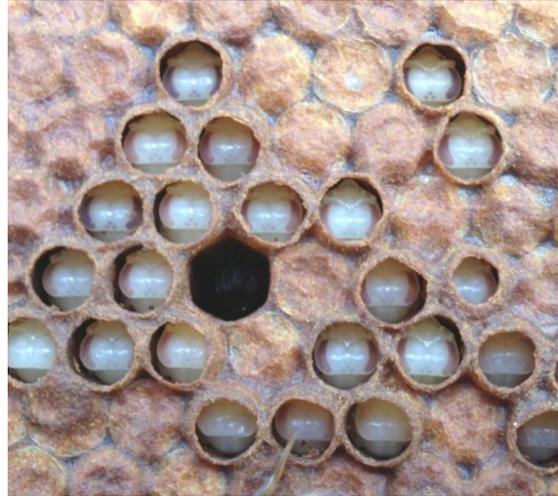
Traditionally BQCV was successfully controlled by treating queen-producing colonies with antibiotics. Although antibiotics do not kill viruses, the treatment likely eliminated other pathogens, allowing the bees' immune systems to better cope with nosema and other viral infections.



Photo by Rob Snyder  
([beeinformed.org](http://beeinformed.org))

## Bald Brood

Bald brood is not a disease, but rather a symptom of a wax moth infestation. As small larvae of *Galleria mellonella* tunnel through combs, worker bees uncap brood cells in order to catch and kill the caterpillars. Patterns of uncapped cells are typically observed in straight rows, extending for several cells. These pupal cells are usually not capped again, but the bees inside continue to develop normally and emerge as adults. Small patches of bald brood should not concern the beekeeper, but attention should be focused on maintaining strong colonies and keeping hives sealed tightly, to prevent wax moths from entering. This condition should not be confused with hygienic behavior, in which brood cells are uncapped, and diseased or mite-infested pupae are removed.



*Bald brood describes a condition where worker bees uncap rows of sealed pupae to remove wax worms. Larvae will typically develop normally. Photo by Ashley Mortensen, University of Florida.*

## Hygienic Behavior

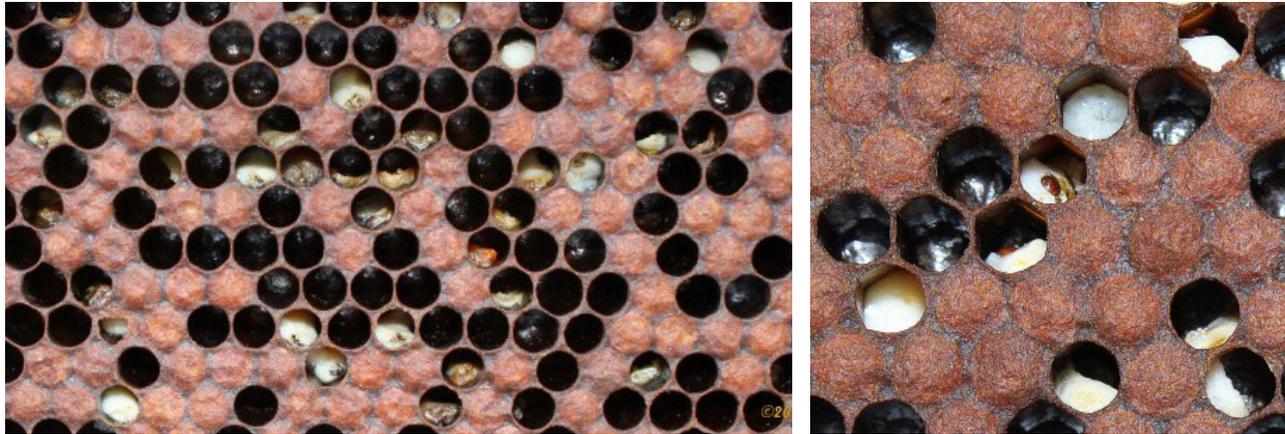
Adult bees will sometimes open capped brood cells and remove developing pupae. This hygienic behavior is thought to be a beneficial genetic trait that helps colonies resist diseases and mite infestations, and is being bred into queen stock to increase its expression in the managed bee population. Hygienic bees appear to uncap cells at random, likely in response to odor cues from the affected brood. Uncapped pupae are often observed to be “chewed down” and destroyed in the process of removing them. This differentiates the symptoms from **bald brood**, which are uncapped in straight rows and left to pupate untouched.



*Hygienic workers removing a varroa-infested pupa from its cell. Photo by Jeffery Harris, Mississippi State University.*

## Parasitic Mite Syndrome (PMS)

This condition is not caused by a single specific pathogen, but is rather the result of a heavy parasitic mite infestation combined with a high load of one or more viruses. Together these factors can cause a colony’s bee population to dwindle due to reduced brood survival. Advanced cases will have such reduced adult bee populations that they cannot adequately feed a healthy queen or support substantial brood rearing, which leads to the colony’s eventual collapse. Queen supersedure is not uncommon.



*Colonies with PMS exhibit a spotty brood pattern, with dead or dying larvae visible in cells (left). Varroa may even be observed feeding in open brood cells (right). Photos by Michael E. Wilson (beeinformed.org).*

Colonies with Parasitic Mite Syndrome exhibit a spotty brood pattern. Varroa mites may be visible on adult bees, may be seen crawling across sealed brood, or may even be observed feeding on larvae in open brood cells. Larvae in open cells may appear off-color and melting down. Symptoms can appear similar to those of European foulbrood, except that the brood in this case may be at different stages of development. Colonies that exhibit hygienic behavior may open capped cells and chew down these pupae.

Colonies with PMS often suffer from multiple viruses, usually transmitted by varroa mites. Bees infected with deformed wing virus (DWV) may or may not be observed crawling around at the hive entrance or on the ground, unable to fly. Many viral infections however, do not exhibit visible symptoms in adult bees. Because the overall health and immune response of the colony has been impacted by mites, other disease symptoms may also be observed, such as chalkbrood, sacbrood or European foulbrood. Beekeepers should consider consolidating the hive into a smaller space the remaining bees can protect. Give supplemental food if needed. Breaking the brood cycle can disrupt disease transmission and mite reproduction. An effective mite treatment is advisable.

## Honey Bee Viruses

Of more than 20 known viruses affecting adult honey bees, some can be grouped based on clinical symptoms, although many others have no obvious visible characteristics. Many viruses are common, and exist at low levels in a colony without becoming pathogenic. These generally weaken individual bees, shorten their lives, and result in smaller, less productive colonies without inducing overt signs of disease. However, other environmental stresses, such as poor nutrition or mite parasitism, can exacerbate colony health.

Some honey bee viruses replicate in specific organs or tissues, and may be transmitted in numerous ways. Some are passed to larvae in brood food, or between adult bees through trophallaxis (food sharing). Other viruses are vectored by parasitic mites, which physically weaken bees and impair immune response while transmitting the pathogens, and thus severely impact colony health. The most accurate diagnostic tests for viruses rely on DNA testing, are performed only by specialized labs, and can be expensive. To reduce the prevalence of viral infection and transmission in a colony, keep mite levels low.

## Deformed Wing Virus

One of the most recognizable viral infections is caused by deformed wing virus (DWV). It can be apparent as bees emerge from pupation with wrinkled, malformed wings, and may exhibit other deformities such as rounded, shortened abdomens. Severely infected bees may be expelled from the colony and may be observed crawling in front of the hive entrance. This condition is most noticeable in summer, when bee and mite populations are both high.



*A worker bee with deformed wing virus, which usually suggests a severe varroa mite infestation. Photo by Klaas de Gelder (flickr.com/photos/klaasdegelder).*

DWV-infected bees cannot fly and cannot perform useful duties in the hive. It is common for infected bees to display no overt symptoms, but will have reduced life spans and impaired learning ability, and can still carry and spread the virus. DWV is transmitted between bees primarily by varroa mites, and is known to replicate within mites, between feeding on different bees. Because they were fed as larvae, but are unable to later contribute to the colony, an abundance of infected bees can greatly impair productivity and overwintering success of a colony. Continual management of varroa is essential in preventing outbreaks by reducing opportunities for mites to transmit DWV to the next generation of developing brood.

## Paralysis Viruses

A complex of viruses with similar effects can be grouped as the paralysis viruses. These include slow paralysis virus (SPV), acute bee paralysis virus (ABPV), Israeli acute paralysis virus (IAPV) and chronic bee paralysis virus (CBPV). Different viruses affect different tissues or parts of the bees. Symptoms will vary but may include adult bees that are unable to fly and may tremble as they walk. They may shiver their wings, may have bloated abdomens, or may have disjointed wings. They may or may not have a dark, greasy, hairless appearance. They generally exhibit progressive paralysis until death, and usually do not live long. They may be harassed or expelled from the hive by other bees, and may be observed crawling near the entrance.

Some of these viruses can infect bumble bees and other insects. All are thought to be common in honey bee populations at low levels, but can become highly virulent in association with varroa mites. Vigilant mite control remains the best defense against these viruses.



*Bees infected with paralysis viruses may have a dark, greasy, hairless appearance. Photo courtesy The Animal and Plant Health Agency (APHA), Crown Copyright (UK).*

## Nosema

Nosema disease is caused by a microscopic fungus called a microsporidium, of which two species are known to affect honey bees. *Nosema apis* was the common European strain, with recognizable symptoms. Typically seen during and at the end of winter, it was simple to treat. However, it has now largely been displaced by an Asian strain, *Nosema ceranae*, which is more virulent, can appear in summer and fall, and can be more difficult to detect or control.

Nosema is common at latent levels, and may not adversely affect an otherwise healthy bee colony. However, when a colony becomes stressed (by mites, poor nutrition, or other pathogens) then the microbes can evade a bee's immune system, leading to a severe infection that impairs foraging behavior, reduces brood care, significantly shortens life span, and decreases winter survival.

These microbes are parasites of the midgut portion of the honey bee digestive tract. Bees consume spores, either when sharing food with infected bees or when cleaning the hive. In the bee's midgut, spores replicate as they destroy the epithelial cells that line the stomach. Reproduction takes 3-4 days, with resulting spores able to immediately infect more cells. As spores multiply, the midgut begins to swell, and bees become progressively weaker. Bees are increasingly unable to digest food, so wastes accumulate in the hindgut and spores are passed with feces. When bees are confined for extended periods, as in overwintering hives or during shipment, the spores can be spread readily through the bee population via fecal contamination of bee hive surfaces.

Streaking with fecal material on frames and near hive entrances is one obvious sign of nosema, but similar dysentery symptoms can also be caused by poor diet. Infected colonies may not always display overt symptoms during good weather, when bees are free to take cleansing flights away from the hive. A number of other symptoms are associated with nosema, but are not necessarily indicators of this disease. These include slow spring build-up, dwindling adult population despite abundant forage, bees crawling on the ground unable to fly, and bees displaying **K-wing**.



*Visible streaking with fecal matter on the front of the hive can be a symptom of nosema infection, but it can also simply be dysentery caused by a poor diet. Photos by Michael E. Wilson (beeinformed.org)*



*Removing a midgut for diagnosis. Photo courtesy Randy Oliver (scientificbeekeeping.com)*

When young adult bees become severely infected with *Nosema*, they may not digest food at all, and become incapable of producing brood food. These bees may skip nursing duties and prematurely begin foraging, which significantly shortens their lives and puts additional pressure on other bees to tend the brood. Queens that become infected are usually superseded. Severe infections result in weak colonies and high winter mortality even when overt symptoms are not obvious.

*Nosema* infection cannot be positively diagnosed without a microscopic examination of the bees' midguts. A sample of 25 bees is recommended, viewed using 400x magnification. Older bees, crawling on the ground in front of the hive, are the most likely to have higher spore counts. However, the threshold for *N. ceranae* spores has not yet been clearly established, and the simple presence of spores does not necessarily indicate a severe outbreak.

Traditionally nosemosis was treated with an antibiotic called fumagillin, but research suggests that resistant strains have developed, and the medication may be insufficient to cure an infection of *N. ceranae*. The best way to prevent this condition is to ensure that bees have a continuous diet of good food, with access to the outside for cleansing flights. During periods of dearth, adding essential oil mixtures to syrup can stimulate feeding, which helps to flush the digestive tracts, and rid bees of excess spores. Spring and summer bees have short life spans, so spores may not have sufficient time to germinate to dangerous levels. *Nosema* disease is most prevalent in overwintering populations, and therefore is a more significant problem for beekeepers in climates with long colder winters. Feeding probiotics may help, by allowing beneficial microbes to competitively exclude harmful microbes in the bees' digestive tract, but sufficient research in this area is currently lacking. Woodenware and combs that have been exposed to *nosema* can be sterilized by scrubbing or fumigating with 80% acetic acid or by freezing equipment for at least 4 days.

## K-Wing

Honey bees have two pairs of wings, the forewings and hindwings. Bees can hook these pairs together during flight, then unhook and fold them back while at rest. Sometimes their wings become disjointed, and the hindwings will stick out somewhat perpendicular to the body in a position that can resemble the letter *K*. Unable to fly, these bees may be seen walking around on the ground in front of the hive. This does not indicate a specific disease, but can be a symptom associated with several conditions including *nosema* infection, severe tracheal mites, or even some viruses. A microscopic diagnosis of the bees is necessary to determine the exact cause, but the presence of numerous bees exhibiting this symptom is cause to investigate further.



*K-wing is not a disease, but can be a symptom of several unrelated problems. Photo courtesy James D. Ellis, University of Florida.*

## Starvation

A common cause of winter mortality is starvation, or rather, the bees freeze to death because they have run out of honey stores to convert into heat energy. Dead bees are found in the spring with their heads in cells, as if searching for food. Usually a small cluster of dead bees is found on the comb, often with the queen, while many others are found in the bottom of the hive.



*Honey bees that have starved are usually found with their heads in the bottoms of cells, as if they had been searching for food. Photo courtesy Alex Wild (alexanderwild.com)*

Occasionally a colony is found to have starved just a few inches from combs full of honey. This is usually after a period of extremely cold weather, causing the bees to tightly cluster and consume all the food within reach. Individual workers are unable to move away from the warm cluster for food, and the cluster itself is unable to break up and move around the edges of the empty comb and onto frames with honey. This can only be avoided if there is ample food above the cluster, onto which they can easily move. Colonies that are found to have little food in cold weather should be provided with syrup or candy boards. If a wintering colony is discovered dead with food in it, place all frames of honey into another hive, and store all combs safely. If left unattended when the weather warms, a dead-out may be robbed by other bees, or the hive may become infested with small hive beetles and wax moths.

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The USDA Honey Bee Research Laboratory offers a **Bee Disease Diagnosis Service** for beekeepers across the U.S. free of cost. Samples of adult bees or comb (with or without bee brood) can be examined for bacterial, fungal and microsporidian diseases, as well as for parasitic mites and other pests associated with honey bees. This laboratory *does not* analyze samples for the presence of viruses or pesticide residue, and does not differentiate between species of *Nosema*.

For complete information on submitting samples for diagnosis, call (301) 504-8821 or e-mail [samuel.abban@usda.gov](mailto:samuel.abban@usda.gov) or visit their website at [www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-barc/beltsville-agricultural-research-center/bee-research-laboratory/docs/bee-disease-diagnosis-service](http://www.ars.usda.gov/northeast-area/beltsville-md-barc/beltsville-agricultural-research-center/bee-research-laboratory/docs/bee-disease-diagnosis-service).

All samples must be packaged and shipped according to the lab's requirements. Samples are only accepted that originate in the United States or its territories, and must include the beekeeper's full contact information. Samples should be addressed to:

**Bee Disease Diagnosis  
Bee Research Laboratory  
10300 Baltimore Ave. BARC-East  
Bldg. 306 Room 316  
Beltsville Agricultural Research Center – East  
Beltsville, MD 20705**

The **USDA National Science Laboratory** provides objective and timely testing services to detect and quantify chemical and pesticide contamination residues in honey bees, honey, wax and other bee hive products. For detailed information about their services and fees, phone (704) 833-1525 or email [NationalScienceLaboratories@ams.usda.gov](mailto:NationalScienceLaboratories@ams.usda.gov) or visit [www.ams.usda.gov/services/lab-testing/nsl](http://www.ams.usda.gov/services/lab-testing/nsl).

The **Bee Informed Partnership** offers services to diagnose honey bee parasites and pathogens (including viruses), as well as detecting pesticide contamination. For more information about their prices and services, or for more detailed and current information about honey bees, their diseases and parasites, and bee hive pests, visit their website at [www.beeinformed.org](http://www.beeinformed.org).

The **Honey Bee Queen & Disease Clinic** at North Carolina State University offers a range of diagnostic services, including pathogen screening and queen genetic quality, as well as the ability to customize experimental evaluations. For more information about their prices and services visit their website at [entomology.ces.ncsu.edu/apiculture/queen-disease-clinic](http://entomology.ces.ncsu.edu/apiculture/queen-disease-clinic).

The **United States Environmental Protection Agency** uses incident report data to help inform pesticide regulatory decisions and identify patterns of bee kills associated with the use of specific pesticide ingredients. Beekeepers that suspect pesticides are responsible for a bee colony death should contact the EPA at [beekill@epa.gov](mailto:beekill@epa.gov).

Arkansas state law requires beekeepers to register the locations of their apiaries with the Arkansas Department of Agriculture to help track and eliminate contagious diseases and hive pests. For a complete copy of the Arkansas Apiary Law and Rules, visit [www.agriculture.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Circular\\_5\\_-\\_Apiary\\_Law\\_\\_\\_Rules.pdf](http://www.agriculture.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Circular_5_-_Apiary_Law___Rules.pdf).

The Arkansas Department of Agriculture also offers free hive inspection services to registered Arkansas beekeepers. Contact the Apiary Section at **(501) 225-1598** for information on apiary registration or to schedule an inspection appointment. Visit [www.agriculture.arkansas.gov/plant-industries/regulatory-section/apiary](http://www.agriculture.arkansas.gov/plant-industries/regulatory-section/apiary) for more information.

Beekeepers outside of Arkansas can find their appropriate local inspection or regulatory agency contacts at [www.apiaryinspectors.org/us-inspection-services](http://www.apiaryinspectors.org/us-inspection-services).

For the most current information on pest and disease treatment recommendations for bee colonies, consult *Insecticide Recommendations for Arkansas - MP144*. This publication is updated each year, and is available at no cost from the University of Arkansas Cooperative Extension Service. Ask for a copy at your local county extension office or view and download it online: [www.uaex.edu/publications/mp-144.aspx](http://www.uaex.edu/publications/mp-144.aspx).

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***The label is the law!***

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