

# GUM LEAF SKELETONISER

## INFORMATION FOR SCHOOLS, KINDERGARTENS AND CHILDCARE FACILITIES

### Gum leaf skeletoniser

The gum leaf skeletoniser (*Uraba lugens*) is an Australian insect, whose immature stage (caterpillar) causes damage mainly to gum trees (*Eucalyptus*) by eating the foliage. This insect is now widespread in the greater Auckland region.

Caterpillars can be easily identified by the following distinguishing features:

- A body covered with many long hairs.
- Pale yellow colour with black and gray markings.
- Often a black hat on the head of the caterpillar. Older caterpillars have taller hats.

### Public Health Issues

The gum leaf skeletoniser (GLS) caterpillar is covered with protective spines that sting and may cause irritation. The stiff spines on GLS are hollow and contain venom, which can be injected into the human skin upon contact. This often results in local pain (sometimes severe) and welts (swollen patches on the skin) that tend to become itchy. This reaction to GLS may last up to several weeks. The exposure of children to GLS is greatest when the caterpillars are at high densities on a particular tree. It should be noted that the spines of dead caterpillars or on shed skin retain their ability to sting.



Gum leaf skeletoniser caterpillar. When mature they are usually 20-25mm.



Leaf skeletonised by young caterpillars.



Typical skin reaction following gum leaf skeletoniser sting.

### THE THREAT

The caterpillar has spines that sting, and lead to a rash and itching on skin contact. If you find gum leaf skeletoniser caterpillars, please prevent children from touching them.

February 2006



For more information on gum leaf skeletoniser, see [www.biosecurity.govt.nz/pest-and-disease-response/pests-and-diseases-watchlist/gum-leaf-skeletoniser](http://www.biosecurity.govt.nz/pest-and-disease-response/pests-and-diseases-watchlist/gum-leaf-skeletoniser)  
For medical advice on treating stings call the National Poisons Centre: **0800 POISON (0800 764 766)**

## Children – the Main Concern

Young children are at the greatest risk of exposure when playing around gum trees infested with caterpillars. This is mainly due to their curiosity and consequent attraction to the caterpillar's bright colour and slow mobility.

Children also tend to have thinner skin and have smaller bodies than adults, both of which may increase the extent of the reaction. While life-threatening reactions are unlikely to occur, the skin reaction may cause extreme discomfort, and be particularly distressing for young children. Ingestion of caterpillars is likely to require hospitalisation.

## Prevention

1. Educate children not to touch or handle GLS caterpillars.
2. Keep an eye out for the signs of GLS infestation (i.e. the leaves on a tree are skeletonised or the presence of the caterpillars themselves).
3. Restrict children's access to areas adjacent to infested trees, and contact a reputable pest controller for mitigating action.
4. If an infested tree is located on public land, notify your local or regional authority.

## First Aid

1. Apply ice packs to the exposed area.
2. In case of eye contact, wash area thoroughly and seek medical attention.
3. If ingestion of caterpillar occurs, seek medical attention immediately.
4. If symptoms develop beyond the immediate area of the sting (e.g. widespread rash, shortness of breath or collapse) call an ambulance straight away.

For advice at anytime, contact the National Poisons Centre on 0800 POISON (0800 764 766).



Children playing around infested trees are at risk of exposure to GLS caterpillars.



Eucalypt trees, which are common in New Zealand parks and gardens, are the preferred food of gum leaf skeletoniser.

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