

## Pantry Pests

I have recently received calls from frantic people wanting to know how and why their food storage has been invaded by insect pests. They wondered how the pests got there and how best to eliminate them.

These invading insects are commonly referred to as “pantry pests” and are usually species of either beetles or moths. They occur nationwide and are most often brought into the home in pre-packed food items purchased from stores or in bulk food storage items such as flour or wheat. Once in the home, they eat food products made from grains, especially wheat. This is why they are often found in pasta, pancake mix, cereals and even dog food.

To prevent these insects from getting into your food storage, store only what your family will actually consume. Food items that sit for long periods are more likely to become infested and then act as a source for other food to become infested. Do not mix old and new food items in the same container. Most pantry pests are also able to chew through thin plastic and paper packaging and can spread from item to item with relative ease. Remove bulk items such as pancake mix, flour, pasta and whole grains from their original packaging and place them in thick plastic or metal containers with tight-fitting lids. This will prevent insects from both penetrating into and out of infested containers.

Good sanitation is important in food storage areas. Vacuuming areas with crevices and cracks is helpful. This physically removes dust and debris pests can consume. When using water to clean, be thorough. Any residue left after washing can dry and still be edible to unwanted insects. Pantry pests sometimes feed on rodent bait and in rodent nests. Check bait frequently and keep food storage areas free of mice and rats. Keep the pantry area dry. Moist conditions are favorable to insect growth.

If you have infested food, it is unwise to use pesticides for control. Instead, depending on how bad the infestation is, it is probably best to throw food away or compost it. Infested food items (or foods you suspect are infested) can be heat treated in the oven by baking for two to four hours at 140 F or freezing items for a minimum of seven days at or below 0 F. However, heat and cold can sometimes impact food taste and quality. Additionally, these treatments do not remove dead insects, though I suppose these dead insects could add protein value to the food. If you have had infestations in the past, traps are available online that can be used to monitor for moth species. No traps exist commercially for beetles. For further information about pantry pests, access the USU fact sheet entitled, *Pantry Pests* at <http://extension.usu.edu/files/publications/factsheet/pantry-pest06.pdf>.