SOOTY BARK DISEASE

(Cryptostroma corticale)

INFORMATION FOR ARBORICULTURAL CONTRACTORS

Arboricultural ASSOCIATION
The home of tree care



Image credit: Henry Kuppen

WHAT IS IT?

Sooty Bark Disease (SBD) is a fungal disease that primarily affects sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*). The fungus may remain latent within apparently healthy trees, with disease development and spore production associated with tree stress, prolonged drought and warm conditions – factors which are becoming more common in the UK. The disease can cause severe decline and may ultimately kill host trees.

Infected trees often contain billions of microscopic black spores. When these spores are disturbed and become airborne, such as during tree work, they present a significant occupational health hazard if inhaled.

IDENTIFICATION

Look for:



Poor crown health, dieback or dead trees



Bark peeling, splitting or bulging



Dense black, soot-like spore masses on the main stem and branch framework

Image credits: Tom Hamments



Trees affected by other issues may show similar symptoms. Poor crown health can have many causes, while dysfunction in the cambium may present as stem bleeding or staining, bark cracking or other similar signs. If SBD is suspected but identification is uncertain, seek advice from an arboricultural consultant or adopt the controls and PPE outlined here as a precaution. Samples may also be sent for laboratory analysis where required.

WHY IS IT A HEALTH RISK?

The spores are highly allergenic and may cause:

- severe respiratory irritation
- asthma-type symptoms
- hypersensitivity pneumonitis

Symptoms may include:

- shortness of breath
- cough
- fever
- night sweats
- chills
- weight loss

Repeated exposure may increase the likelihood of sensitisation.

COSHH

Sooty Bark Disease spores are a substance hazardous to health.

Work involving infected trees should therefore be considered under the **Control of Substances Hazardous to Health Regulations (COSHH).**

Employers should:

- identify the hazard
- assess the risk of exposure
- implement suitable control measures
- provide appropriate information, instruction and training
- ensure suitable PPE is available and worn

A **COSHH assessment** should be completed and made available to operators. It should be supported by a site-specific risk assessment addressing hazards and control measures that may vary from site to site.

RISK CONTROL MEASURES

Establish an appropriately sized exclusion zone to prevent exposure to third parties. This zone will often need to be significantly larger than that normally required for tree work and should take account of wind direction and the potential for airborne spores to travel beyond the immediate work area.

Schedule work during or shortly after wet weather where possible to minimise airborne spores. Material may also be sprayed with water before processing to dampen the surface (e.g. using a hosepipe or water bowser).

Minimise cutting, processing and handling. Where possible, retain material on site in as unprocessed a form as practicable (e.g. habitat piles).

Where processing is necessary, use mechanical means where available to reduce operator exposure.

PPE

During any work involving SBD, operators should wear:

- **FFP3 respirator** – a half mask is normally appropriate and compatible with other PPE
- **Sealed safety goggles** – worn beneath a mesh visor. EN ISO 16321 / EN 166-rated eye protection may be used instead of the visor where appropriate to the risk profile of the operation
- **Disposable hooded coveralls** – worn over other clothing to minimise contamination
- **Gloves** – suitable for the work being undertaken
- **Task-specific PPE** – all other PPE should remain appropriate to the task (e.g. chainsaw protective boots/trousers)



Disposable coveralls should be carefully removed and disposed of after use to avoid contaminating clothing. Clean reusable PPE before leaving site.

DISPOSAL

There are **no specific statutory disposal requirements** for Sooty Bark Disease in the UK. However, good practice includes:

- ✓ Retain material on site wherever possible, e.g. minimally processed habitat piles, with controlled burning or burial where practicable and legally permissible.
- ✓ Transport material in a manner that minimises spore release where it cannot reasonably be avoided.
- ✗ Do not retain infected timber for firewood or any other use where subsequent operator or third-party exposure is foreseeable.
- ✗ Do not mix contaminated material with loads intended for reuse.
- ✓ Confirm with third-party hauliers or receivers that they are able to accept contaminated material (e.g. biomass facilities).

REPORTING

Forest Research encourages suspected cases to be reported through **TreeAlert** to help monitor the distribution of the disease within Great Britain. The Northern Ireland equivalent is **DAERA's TreeCheck**.

TreeAlert

TreeCheck

Where SBD is known or suspected, this information should be communicated to everyone involved in commissioning, planning or undertaking the work.