



## Nosema Disease – Diagnosis and Control

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### Biology

#### 1. *Basic Biology*

- Caused by two different species of *Nosema apis* and *Nosema ceranae*. While *N. apis* has long been known to infect honey bees, *N. ceranae* may have been recently introduced. *Nosema* belongs to a group of highly specialised parasitic fungi.
- **Only infects adult bees.** Although all castes are susceptible, workers are more readily infected.
- The infection begins when bees ingest *Nosema* spores (Figure 1).
- When the spore reaches the bee gut, it explosively uncoils a long straw-like polar filament. The filament penetrates outer gut cells and, in the process, infects them. The infection gradually colonises the entire gut (within 2 weeks in *N. apis*).
- Spores pass to other workers when they are shed in worker feces. The infection spreads during periods when workers have fewest opportunities for cleansing flights (eg winter) and are forced to defecate onto the comb. Residual spores on the comb continue to infect bees even after cleansing flight resumes.

#### 2. *Seasonal Disease Cycle*

- *N. apis* infection typically increases through late winter and peaks by late spring/early summer. The seasonal cycle of *N. ceranae* remains unknown.

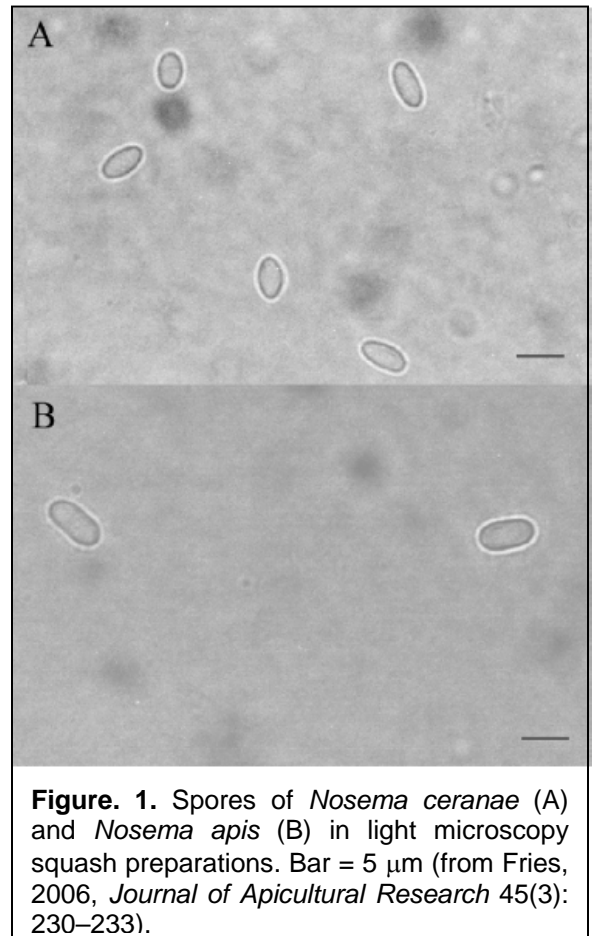
#### 3. *Economic Impact*

- Infected workers do not adequately develop their nursing glands and have a reduced lifespan.
- Infected queens are usually superseded, even when the infection is light.
- Overall colonies infected with *N. apis* are more likely to die overwinter, are slow to build in the spring and are poor honey producers in the summer. The impact of *N. ceranae* has not been determined, but some early research suggests its effects are more severe.

### Diagnosis:

#### 1. *Collecting Samples*

- Collect 10 to 25 bees from hive entrance. In poor weather, bees can be sampled from under the top lid or the outside of the cluster. It is important that the bees collected are older as bees less than 8 days old will not have had time to become infected.
- To estimate the overall level of *N. apis* infection for a yard it is recommended that a few bees from the hive entrance of a number of colonies in the yard be collected. Total sample size should be ~100 bees.
- Although live bees are preferable, dead bees can also be collected and examined for spores.



**Figure 1.** Spores of *Nosema ceranae* (A) and *Nosema apis* (B) in light microscopy squash preparations. Bar = 5  $\mu$ m (from Fries, 2006, *Journal of Apicultural Research* 45(3): 230–233).

- Sampling can be done in the late fall or in the early spring.

## 2. Mailing Samples

- If samples are to be mailed away for diagnosis, live bees should be soaked in alcohol for at least 5 minutes and dead bees for 10 minutes. Drain off the alcohol and seal sample in a suitable container. Isopropyl (rubbing) alcohol is readily available but other types will also suffice. The alcohol will prevent the bees from decomposing prior to examination.
- It is important to also include any other observations which might provide information about the colony's problem.
- Samples for diagnosis can be sent to your provincial apiculturalist.

## 3. Microscopic Examination

- Microscopic examination is the only method which will provide a definitive diagnosis of nosema.
- Place bee samples in freezer to immobilize bees. Add 1 mL water/bee and grind up sample until mixture is uniform. A mortar and pestle works nicely or samples can be sealed in a Ziploc bag and crushed using a rolling pin. For a cleaner preparation, remove heads and use only the abdomens or remove the digestive tracts from the abdomen and grind up. A good website that explains how to remove the abdomens is <http://www.ars.usda.gov/is/np/honeybeediseases/honeybeediseases.pdf>.
- Bees can also be examined individually to obtain a percentage of infected bees per colony.
- Place a drop of the suspension on a microscope slide and cover with a cover slip. Examine for *N.apis* spores under the high dry objective (400x) of a compound microscope. **Important:** this will only tell you whether nosema is present or not.
- To determine the number of spores per bee a counting chamber or haemocytometer can be used. It can be purchased from a scientific supply house. A haemocytometer consists of a special cover slip, a chamber that holds a specific volume of fluid (0.05 x 0.05 x 0.1 mm = 0.00025ml) and is marked with a grid pattern.
- Place a small volume of spore suspension under the cover glass, an eyedropper works nicely. When the droplet touches the cover glass and chamber the correct volume will fill the chamber. Allow spore suspension to settle for 3 minutes. Count.
- To count, find the ruled area and focus the microscope to sharply define spores. Count all spores in 5 blocks of 16 small squares. Do not count spores directly on the lower or left line of the large block but do count spores on the upper and right hand lines. A total of 80 small squares will be counted.
- Calculate number of spores per bee:  

$$\# \text{ of spores/bee} = \text{average number of spores per little square} \times 4,000,000.$$
- A good website which shows videos on using the haemocytometer is [http://www.uni-greifswald.de/~immuteach/methods/counting\\_chamber/counting\\_chamber.html#](http://www.uni-greifswald.de/~immuteach/methods/counting_chamber/counting_chamber.html#)

## 4. Interpretation of Results

- Treat colonies if there are **more than 1 million spores per bee or if 50% of bees are infected**

### Control:

#### 1. Disinfecting Comb

- Nosema readily introduced to healthy on contaminated comb. Experimental work suggests that colonies transferred onto foundation or disinfected drawn comb maintain minimal levels of nosema without the aid of medication. Transfer of colonies to clean equipment is readily done during the spring dandelion flow (Figure 3).
- Comb can be disinfected by electron-beam irradiation, maintaining comb at 50°C (120°F) for 24h or fumigation with concentrated (80%) acetic acid (150ml per stack of five supers) for one week (Figure 4).

#### 2. Medication

- Fumagillin (dicyclohexylammonium fumagillin) is the only product registered for the control of nosema. It is marketed under the trade name Fumagilin-B (Medivet Pharmaceuticals, High River,

- AB). Each gram of Fumagilin-B contains 21 g fumagillin. There are two rates on the label and treatments are fed preventatively in syrup feed:
- Wintered Colonies. Each is treated with 190mg of fumagillin in the fall (ie about 9.0 g **Fumagilin-B** per colony). Consequently treatment of 50 colonies would require the entire contents of a 454g jar of Fumagilin-B.
  - Package Colonies. Each is treated with 95mg of fumagillin in the spring after hiving (ie about 4.5 g **Fumagilin-B** per colony). Consequently treatment of 100 colonies would require the entire contents of a 454g jar of Fumagilin-B.
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  - **Stability**. Fumagillin rapidly breaks down in light. Studies have shown, however, that the breakdown products remain active against Nosema even after continuously being exposed to daylight for 6 hours. Samples of spring honey taken from colonies medicated the previous fall demonstrate that fumagillin remains active through the wintering period. Nonetheless a number of W. Canadian studies suggest that colonies treated with fumagillin in the fall may have elevated levels of nosema in spring and may benefit from a second treatment.
  - **Queen Production**. In the close-confines of a mating nuc there is an increased chance that a queen will be infected with nosema. It is important to medicate any infected mating nuc with fumagillin before installing queen cells. Similarly, attendant bees in queen cages should be drawn from colonies that have been medicated. Nosema infected queens frequently supersede and it is important to prevent their infection. Surveys of commercial queens indicate that up to 10% of the queens sold have nosema.

