

Look Out! It's Chigger Season

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Once the weather starts to warm up and the hills are turning really green, many outdoors folks start to worry about ticks. But for me, the bigger concern is chiggers. Granted chiggers don't generally carry disease, but they are so small you can't see them. I can find ticks and remove them, but chiggers aren't known until the red welts and the itching show up!

There's a lot of misinformation floating around about chiggers. Chiggers do not burrow under the skin and they don't suck blood. Chiggers are a mite, specifically a larval state of a mite so they only have six legs. They are so small that you will rarely, if ever, see one. While they can transmit diseases to animals, they rarely transmit diseases to humans, at least not in Kansas. Chiggers overwinter as adults. When soil surface temperatures are regularly above 60 degrees the adults lay eggs. After hatching, the larva crawl up on grass blades and wait for any warm blooded host to walk by.

Once the chigger has landed on a host they start moving around trying to find a good feeding site. Often they'll take up residence by a hair follicle. These rascals are small, less than 1/100th of an inch long. Chiggers attach their mouth parts to the skin surface then secrete saliva that digests skin cells. If left they will feed for two to four days and then drop off their host. After dropping off they molt, become a nymph and spend the rest of their life feeding on insects, other mites and their eggs.

There are a couple of different theories about why chigger bites itch so badly but basically the body is reacting to a foreign substance in the skin, whether it is the saliva or the mouthpart. Usually within an hour or two of the initiation of a chigger bite, a red welt will develop (some refer to this as a wheal) and itching will begin shortly thereafter. Itching will often last for four to seven days and the welt for even longer than that.

Since chiggers are most commonly found in grassy areas, you need to use personal protection if you will be in those areas in early and mid summer especially. Because chiggers are so small, they can go right through the weave of blue jeans and many other fabrics. Use of repellents from the waist down is critical to keep chigger issues at a minimum. Thoroughly cover clothing and skin from the waist down. Repellents containing 30% DEET (stronger isn't better!) will reduce the number of chiggers that bite you. There are also clothing only treatments that contain 0.5% permethrin that I have found to be very effective in reducing chigger and tick issues.

Once you have returned home from a probable exposure experience a good bath or shower will often remove many of the chiggers. Scrub vigorously from the waist down to help dislodge those little biters! Do not use solvents, chlorine bleach or kerosene to try to remove chiggers. These are not proper skin cleaning products and could have adverse effects on your health!

Once you have a bite, treat with the anti-itch product of choice. If you are having a severe reaction contact your doctor or dermatologist. Generally products containing over the counter steroids are effective for most people. Chiggers can be a problem in yards, especially if the yards are overgrown. Treating a lawn area with just about any lawn and garden insecticide will do a good job of reducing the population of chiggers, ticks and other biting insects. Be sure to read and follow label directions!