

Insect Borne Disease Risk is Real

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

This is Kansas. We have insects and arthropods by the thousands of species in Kansas. A few of those feed on humans, like ticks, mosquitoes and chiggers. Some of those, like ticks and mosquitoes, can infect humans with various diseases. While the occurrence of these infections is still fairly rare in the state, they are very real and need to be taken seriously. But not so seriously that you sequester yourself indoors for the remainder of the summer and panic if you receive a bite.

We all know about West Nile Virus or Lyme Disease. These are the most recent “outbreaks” that we’ve dealt with, call them the insect borne “disease de jour”. But long before those were in the state we were dealing with Rocky Mountain Spotted Fever, various types of ehrlichiosis, and Tularemia. Insect borne diseases are nothing new and we’re going to be continually dealing with new ones that are either moving here from elsewhere or are being newly discovered. Two that are on the horizon, Chikungunya (spread by mosquitoes) and Heartland Virus (another one spread by ticks and confirmed in Oklahoma and Missouri but not yet Kansas) are concerning as well.

Fortunately, while causing a great deal of discomfort, especially to me, right now, chiggers, at least in the US, do not transmit diseases! Chiggers are bad right now and will continue to be an issue probably through late July. Ticks have been bad and aren’t going to get better with the humidity and rainfall. If you spend any time outdoors you are probably noticing a big surge in mosquito numbers over the past week or so. This is also only going to get worse as long as it keeps raining.

As I said, you shouldn’t let the risk of these nuisance pests and the diseases that they may carry keep you inside. The actual number of ticks or mosquitoes that are carrying a disease organism that they can pass on to you isn’t that great, but the more you are exposed to bites from either, the greater the likelihood that you will contract something.

The first thing you need to do is personal protection. Use DEET based repellents on skin or clothing, or use permethrin based repellents on clothing only. These will all work well for mosquitoes, chiggers and ticks. There are other things that can work as repellents, but none will last as long or work as well as these. Read the label for directions and re-application timing intervals. Once you come back inside, take a shower and check for any ticks that may have gotten past the repellents. It takes several hours for a tick to get well enough attached to actually transmit any disease organisms so use that to your advantage.

In your own yard you can use a lawn and garden insecticide to treat the lawn and reduce the number of chiggers and ticks. Look for one that comes with a built in applicator that you can attach to the garden hose and apply a good thorough spray as described on the label. Mosquitoes are much harder to control with sprays so focus on eliminating standing water. Even a small container of water, if it holds water for 7 to 10 days, can produce a lot of mosquitoes. Change pet water or bird bath water every few days and eliminate all other standing water no matter how small.

We will have biting insects every summer. Some summers will be worse than others. But you can minimize the discomfort and disease risk by taking a few simple steps to decrease the number of critters around you and your chances of being bit! Enjoy the summer but protect yourself!