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Those May Not be Chigger Bites

AGRI-VIEWS
by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If all of a sudden in recent weeks it feels like you've started getting more chigger bites, but they seem to be occurring more above the waist, unlike typical chigger bites on the lower torso, legs and ankles, then you may very well not be experiencing chigger bites. What you may be experiencing is the oak leaf itch mite. Unlike chiggers, which usually arrive from vegetation and move from the ankles up concentrating underneath tight fitting clothing, oak leaf itch mites do in fact drop from oak trees and if they land on people may bite them. These bites are often random but most frequently are on the upper torso, arms, neck or head.

This pest has popped up periodically over the past 15 years or so in various parts of Kansas. The itch mite is tiny, generally 1/125th of an inch long. It feeds on midges that are found on oak trees. If you have an oak tree in your yard, specifically a pin oak, but other red oaks and black oaks as well, look at the leaves. If the edges of some of the leaves appear to be rolled up and thickened then you have the midges that are the primary food source for the itch mite.

The leaf margin gall midge, while causing some of the leaves to be disfigured and unsightly, doesn't really cause much damage to the oak tree or to us. The itch mite feeds on those midge larvae so ultimately they are good. But bites on humans are an unwelcome byproduct.

The female itch mite enters the gall through a small opening and paralyzes the midge larva, which is visible to the naked eye, and starts to feed. As the female feeds she develops about 200 offpsring. In about a week her progeny emerge as fully developed adults. Females account for 90 to 95% of the young she produces. Males mate with the females, then drop to the ground and die without feeding. These tiny female mites then drop from the tree or may be carried by wind. Because of their short life cycle and relatively high reproduction rate, when suitable hosts are found, the population can explode in just a few weeks. A study in Nebraska in previous outbreaks found the number of mites dropping from large pin oaks exceeded 300,000 mites per tree per day!

When they bite humans they tend to bite under loose clothing focusing on the neck, shoulders and chest. Just like with chiggers, individuals will have varying reactions. Welts generally show up 10 to 16 hours after exposure. The welts itch like crazy, but if you do itch them, it hurts! I've already had one bite this year so I know! Generally, the intense itching starts to dwindle after about 72 hours, or at least it did with my bite. Not every mite that lands on you will bite you. Many will probably just fall off. But those that do bite will leave you with quite a memory. You won't feel the bite, but you'll know soon enough that they were there!

Unfortunately there isn't a whole lot you can do to prevent this malady. Since the casual agent, the leaf margin gall midge, is feeding within the safety of a gall, surrounded by plant tissue, normal sprays won't reach it. Since the itch mite is feeding on the midge larvae within the gall, sprays won't reach them either. Insect repellents don't seem to be effective at preventing bites. This problem is very seasonal occurring at this time of year. If you've been spending time under pin oak or red oak trees, it would be advisable to change clothes and shower or bathe as soon as you go inside. The mites won't live or breed inside of homes. If you develop welts, treat them with the same products you'd use for other insect bites. Antihistamines may reduce the amount of itching as well. Usually these outbreaks are isolated and don't happen in succeeding years. Hopefully the season should be over in a few weeks. Until then, be aware, stock up on cortisone cream and be prepared!

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