

Chiggers!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

Mosquitoes are annoying. They buzz around your head, attack you right in the middle of the back where you can't reach, and they can carry disease. Ticks are disgusting. They wait in the vegetation, with their little front legs reaching out in front of them, until you walk by and then they snag on to you and start crawling up trying to find a place to attach (but they don't drop out of trees on your head!) While they can also carry diseases, please do keep in mind that not every tick or mosquito does carry a disease. Most do not, but there's no way to tell by looking which ones are or aren't.

But then there are chiggers. Chiggers. You never see them. You only know that they were there when it is too late to do anything but itch. Fortunately, at least here in Kansas, chiggers do not carry and transmit diseases. Mosquitoes and ticks are an annoyance to me, but I HATE chiggers!

From an entomological point of view, chiggers are kind of fascinating. They aren't a true insect as adults have eight legs. They are a mite. Or maybe I should say they are a lot of mites as there are nearly four dozen species of chigger mites in Kansas. The hatching stage, or larval stage, of chiggers are parasitic on animals. Many of the dozens of species have a very specific host range. Some species need rodents, or bats or snakes, etc. But most of our suffering is from one specific species that doesn't even have a common name beyond "chigger."

The larval stage will feed on it's host for two to four days if not removed by washing. After feeding they will drop off the host, go through a molt and become a nymph and then an adult. Once they become a nymph they are no longer a threat to humans. At that point they go on to their other specific host, generally small insects, other mites and mite eggs. Their complete life cycle is seven to ten weeks but from mid spring through cold fall weather there will always be at least a few around. We are probably just emerging from the peak of larval activity, but trust me, I can tell you from personal experience that they are still out there!

Larval chiggers are tiny, less than one one-hundredth of an inch long, nearly invisible to most people. They are so small they can go right through the weave of denim jeans. Chiggers don't suck blood and they don't burrow under the skin. They attach their mouth parts to the skin surface, often at a hair follicle or pore, and secrete saliva that digests skin cells. Usually if you can wash them off within an hour or two you won't have much of a reaction. The itching usually begins three to six hours after the initial bite and can continue for several days to a couple of weeks. Most authorities feel that the itching is caused by histamines released from the dissolved skin cells. Often these feeding sites are under tight fitting clothing like socks and underwear.

Most of our insect repellents work well against chiggers IF you remember to put it on. DEET, picaridin, and lemon eucalyptus oil based products work well on skin. I really have good luck using the permethrin products applied to clothing. Then wash well upon returning inside and if you do get bites, treat with the typical products. Products containing antihistamines seem to work well as does anything that will help seal the bite from the air. If you have extreme reactions, see your doctor for stronger treatments.

Chiggers are going to be a regular occurrence in eastern Kansas every year. Use repellents to reduce exposure, but if that doesn't work and you get a few or a few dozen bites, just know that you're in good company, and misery loves company!