

Chigger Season is Heating Up Too!

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

If anyone has been spending much time outside during June you have noticed that the weather has certainly been heating up! If you've been out in the grass or any vegetation for that matter during the month, you've also noticed that chiggers have been as hot as the weather. A fine day outside with the family can often lead to ten days of itching madness with chigger bites in places you don't even want to talk or think about!

There are over 45 species of chigger mites in Kansas. Adults have eight legs so they are not a true insect. They overwinter as adults which lay eggs once the soil starts to warm up. Adults are just barely visible at 1/20th of an inch long. The larval chigger has six legs and is barely visible at 1/120th to 1/160th of an inch long. The larval (hatching) stage are parasitic on animals. They will feed on rodents, bats, snakes, etc. and many of them have a very narrow host range. Most of our pain and suffering comes from a very specific chigger species that has no common name! Once they achieve that first meal they molt into a nymph stage at which point they move on to other food sources, mainly small insects, other mites and their eggs. The chigger life cycle is about seven to ten weeks long and while we have a big hatch early in the season, you can expect periodic issues with chiggers until cold weather in the fall.

When chiggers hatch, often after a rainstorm, they crawl up on vegetation waiting for a potential meal to walk by. If you walk by they will grab on to you as you brush against the vegetation. They don't suck blood but rather find a hair follicle, attach their mouth parts to your skin and secrete saliva into your skin which then breaks down and digests your skin cells. If left along they will feed for two to four days before dropping off to molt. Generally chiggers have to be in place for more than hour to generate a response so bathing shortly after returning inside can often remove them before they can do their damage.

For most people the reaction starts to occur within three to six hours of the initiation of feeding. Ten to sixteen hours after feeding starts you'll often see the telltale red welt. This is basically an allergic reaction and everyone reacts differently to it. Some people have a mild reaction, others a very violent reaction. Chiggers really like to move around and get under tight fitting clothing like the elastic bands in underwear or under socks, often from the waist down. This differs from the equally annoying oak itch mite which generally bites above the waist and doesn't get under tight fitting clothing.

Avoidance is the first step to not having chigger bites. Even one or two steps into grass or vegetation can be all it takes for a chigger to find you. Insect repellents applied either to skin or clothing can be very helpful but have to be applied everywhere that vegetation may touch you. Home lawns can be treated with lawn and garden insecticides to help reduce populations of chiggers and ticks, although lawn treatments do very little to reduce mosquito populations.

Once the welts start showing up you're in for several days of anguish. Topical over the counter anti-itch medications are the most commonly used treatment. Excessive itching can lead to infections so if you or a family member is having an extreme reaction, a visit to your family physician is in order. It's important to remember that chigger bites can happen anytime until cold weather so just be prepared to avoid or protect. If all else fails, you can just stay inside until late October!