

Protect Yourself From Biting Insects

AGRI-VIEWS

by Chuck Otte, Geary County Extension Agent

It's Memorial Day weekend, the start of the "summer" fun season. While much of our world seems to have been turned upside down we can still count on spending time outside with family, enjoying the great outdoors and dealing with various biting arthropods. It's more than just insects as ticks and chiggers are not insects, they have eight legs as adults! The nuisance and annoyance factor aside, virtually all of those biting critters, with the exception of chiggers, can carry diseases that can cause life long issues.

A lot of people panic about ticks, but let's start with mosquitoes. Most people just say mosquito without realizing that there are about 50 species of mosquitoes in Kansas. Some are early season pests, some are late season pests, some range far and wide and others stay pretty close to home. The one thing that they all have in common is that the only the females bite and ingest blood which they must do to be able to lay eggs. Both sexes are nectar feeders. There are several diseases that mosquitoes can carry. In recent years much of the focus has been on West Nile Virus but world wide mosquitoes can carry many different diseases.

Chiggers are a nuisance but carry no diseases. There are over 45 species of chiggers in Kansas and most of the time they feed on insects or other chiggers. Interestingly only larval chiggers, the first life stage after hatching from the egg, is what feeds on mammals including us. They are tiny, less than 1/100 of an inch long. They can go right through the weave of denim. They get on our skin, preferring to be under tight fitting parts of clothing, they latch on to our skin often at a hair follicle or pore and secrete saliva that digests skin cells. They don't suck blood and they don't burrow under the skin. They are easily washed off immediately after coming inside and this will help reduce the discomfort from their bites. If not washed off they may feed for a couple of days. After they have their one mammal meal they molt and go on to bother other creatures.

Ticks are the ones that most people despise and they can carry a whole host of potential diseases and conditions. They aren't born with these organisms in their system, they have to acquire these disease causing organisms from some other host and then pass them on to humans. We have several tick species in Kansas but most of the issues are caused by deer ticks, dog ticks or lone star ticks. They crawl up from low, they do not drop from trees. They often roam around for quite some time before starting to attach and feed. Regular checking of yourself and children is crucial during and immediately after outings.

Many homeowners want to spray the yard regularly to control these pests and there are several home lawn and garden insecticides that will help especially with ticks and chiggers but not so much mosquitoes. The most important thing that you can do though is to use personal protection if you're going to be off paved surfaces and "in the vegetation". In spite of a lot of testimonials for all sorts of home remedies, there are basically three repellents that have time and time again proven to be effective. There are clothing repellents that contain permethrin that are very effective especially against ticks and chiggers. But these are clothing treatments only. For skin application use something that contains DEET or picaridin. Read and follow label directions for any of these products, do a check for ticks after you've returned home and wash off skin areas where repellents were applied at that time. Picaridin is especially effective in helping to repel those annoying little gnats, black flies or no-see-ums that love cool wet early season weather!