
My Ankles Say it is Chigger Season

Chiggers are larva of *Trombiaila alfreddugesi*, the harvest mite. Chiggers pierce skin and inject a digestive juice that converts skin to food. This liquid causes an allergic reaction in humans and leads to red, itchy bumps.

Chiggers do not bury themselves in skin but will remain attached for several days while feeding. Luckily, they are easy to brush off, especially if soapy water is used. Chiggers only feed once and will die quickly if dislodged.

Chiggers do not carry diseases in North America, so the biggest health risk is a secondary bacterial or fungal infection from scratching. It is hard to resist the itching. Use a sealant-antihistamine, such as Caladryl, to treat bites because the sealant will ease the itching and the antihistamine will prevent inflammation. Sun screen containing Benzocaine, petroleum jelly and baby oil can also be used to temporarily sooth the itching, (roll-on deodorant works for me).

While treatment is good, prevention is better. When going in to a chigger-infested area, wear loose-fitting but tightly woven clothes with boots. Treat both clothing and skin with repellent. The most effective insect repellents contain diethyl-meta-toluamide (DEET). DEET comes in concentrations of 5 to 9 percent, and higher percentage repellents should not be used on people with sensitive skin, such as children or the elderly. Spraying the cuffs of pants, and socks can help reduce chigger problems.

Chiggers roam looking for a hot, sweaty place to feed but will stop if they reach a barrier, like a tight cuff or belt. Because of this, take extra care to protect behind the knees, under waist bands and belts, shoe and sock tops, the crotch and the armpits. Showering after being outdoors may wash off chiggers before they have had the chance to bite.

Insecticides can be applied to lawns, but they may also kill helpful bug-killing spiders. This is only practical as a treatment 3-4 days ahead of a lawn party. Spraying the turf, shrubs and perennial flowers can be effective in reducing chiggers and mosquitos for a few days.

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