

Out of sight – but not out of mind. The itching they cause is a constant reminder they exist even if we can't see them. The pleasure of a picnic in the park or attending any other outdoor function can easily be ruined when these miniscule menaces are around. I'm referring to those nearly microscopic, irritating pests we call chiggers.

If you are one who is readily attacked by these critters, you know how aggravating they can be. Chiggers first show up as annoying bumps. Savage scratching begins. More red welts appear from your feet upward. They even attack those tender locations that you know best not to scratch in public. Persistent scratching and itching lasts for days and for some poor souls, it can even last for weeks.

Chiggers are tiny — less than 1/150 of an inch in diameter. Individually they are nearly impossible to see; however, when several cluster together near a waistband they appear bright red in color. They are not insects. A chigger is actually the larva stage of a tiny mite that causes the irritation. Mites are arachnids, much like ticks and spiders.

Chiggers bite and attach to our bodies where the skin is thin and in areas where it is wrinkled and constricted. That is why most bites occur on our ankles; backs of knees; beneath the belt line; in the armpits; and oh, yes, even in the groin region. Their bite itself is not the itch. When chiggers bite our skin, they secrete saliva containing a powerful digestive enzyme that liquefies the skin tissue. It is this liquid skin tissue on which the chigger feeds, not our blood. A few hours after being bitten, our skin reacts to the chigger's enzyme and forms red, hardened inflamed welts that become irritating.

Chiggers continue feeding for a few days, enjoying their meal, but the good news is our scratching often kills them. Unfortunately, even after they are gone, the irritation continues. Eventually the red welts heal, a slow process which can take a week or longer. In the meantime, the itching continues.

Chiggers seldom survive in well-groomed, outdoor areas — one good reason to keep the grass cut and clear away weeds and other undesirable vegetation.

Interestingly, concentrations of chiggers in grass and other vegetation can be spotty. For example, some individuals will be savagely attacked while sitting in a

chigger-infested area, while more fortunate individuals sitting only a few yards away will receive no bites. Because women and children often have thinner skin than men, they are often more prone to be bothered by chiggers.

One's first defense against chigger bites is using repellents. Regular mosquito repellents will repel, but only for a few hours. The best defense for chiggers is powdered sulphur. Powdered sulphur, called sublimed sulphur, or flowers of sulphur, is available at most pharmacies. Dust the powdered sulphur around the pant cuffs, socks and shoes. I recently read where some people will mix talcum powder and sulfur and apply it directly to arms, legs and waist. Keep in mind, sulphur has a strong odor and when combined with perspiration, you may smell somewhat offensive to other individuals near you. Also, because a few individuals might be sensitive to sulphur, a test using a small amount on the skin is first advised.

When returning home after an outing where chiggers might be suspected, immediately change clothes and wash them before wearing them again. Take a warm bath or shower using plenty of soapy, scrubbing action.

If you still find yourself suffering from chigger bites after taking the above precautions, over-the-counter creams and lotions will somewhat relieve the itching. Sadly, time is your only cure. One bright bit of information is we have nothing to fear from chiggers except their terrible itch. They transmit no diseases. The only infection you may get from chiggers is from scratching with dirty fingernails.

Although chiggers may be out of sight, once bitten, I can assure you, they won't be out of mind. Happy picnicking.