
The Truth About Chiggers

If I flew to the moon, there would be a chigger on the dark side waiting for me. They are waiting for me every summer in every lawn task I do, every farmer's field I examine, and every picnic I attend. I thought in this column I would examine what a chigger is and why they choose to invade my world. There must be a reason.

There is a reason -- I can't see them. The adult chigger mite is about one-twentieth of an inch in size. It does not feed on humans. It is the larval stage, which are one-one hundred and twentieth to one- one hundred and fiftieth of an inch in size, that feed on humans. No wonder I can't see what makes me itch.

These chigger larvae crawl up on grasses, weeds, flowers, and shrubs of all kinds and snag onto passing travelers. Chigger larvae are so small they have no problem passing through the weave of most fabrics. They do not burrow into the skin, nor do they suck blood like a mosquito or tick. They are even more sinister. They crawl into a hair follicle, pierce the skin, inject digestive enzymes that liquefy the skin tissues which are sucked up by the chigger larvae over a four day period. Bathing and laundering clothing helps to remove most larvae before they complete their feeding. This is small solace as the injury and intense itching are left to heal slowly. The itching usually starts three to six hours after the larvae have fed. You notice the injury after the work or fun are done and you have cleaned up.

The adult chigger feeds on the eggs and nymphs of springtails, and mosquitoes. Like every critter they have good points and bad points. Farther south they have numerous generations per year. In Nebraska we are only bothered by two generations per year in the warmest parts of the summer from May through August.

Chiggers are also pests of snakes, birds, turtles, and other mammals. Animals will suffer the same itching, and the reactions will reduce growth and can lead to secondary infections. Chiggers are not known to carry diseases like mosquitoes or ticks can do.

DEET-based repellants used for mosquitos can be effective for several hours. Apply to upper edges of socks, cuffs, waistbands, and exposed skin in these same areas. This will reduce the chigger bites. Some always find their way through to my ankles and knees. Avoid itching these areas. If you do itch try to itch the surface and not cause further infection by opening and reopening the small sores. Treat as necessary with anti-itch lotions and/or disinfectants.

I enjoy summer, but I like springs and falls better. I have trained myself to use protection more often, but when I need to wade through the ditch to look at the crop, I still go and suffer the chigger attack. It comes as part of life in Nebraska.

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