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Chiggers Anyone?

Chiggers are more numerous in early summer when grass, weeds and other vegetation are plentiful. In Texas, two species of chiggers mainly affect humans and other animals. One species lives in fields, grass and weed areas, while the other species likes moist habitats such as in swamps, rotten logs and stumps.

Chiggers develop in four life stages: egg, larva, nymph and adult. Eggs hatch into six-legged larvae, which is the only stage that feeds on humans and animals. After hatching, chigger larvae climb up onto vegetation so they can crawl onto a passing host. Chigger larvae prefer to bite people in places where clothing fits tightly over the skin such as around the waistline, under socks, or where the skin is thin or wrinkled such as around the ankles or the back of knees. Chigger larvae insert their mouthparts into a skin pore or hair follicle, and then inject a digestive fluid to dissolve skin cells. This results in itchy, reddish welts to appear on the skin. It is the dissolved cells not blood that the chigger ingests as food. The tiny larval chigger mites do not present a real medical health concern, but they can make outdoor events an unpleasant experience.

After feeding, the larvae drop off of the host to molt into eight-legged nymphs which then turn into adults. Chigger nymphs and adults feed on eggs of springtails, isopods, and mosquitoes. Adult chigger mites are about 1/20 inch long, bright red, and have hairy bodies. Adult chiggers pass the winter in protected places and become active in the spring.

Suggestions for relief after exposure:

Laundry field clothes in hot, soapy water to kill chigger larvae. Infested clothes should not be worn until properly laundered and/or exposed to sunshine.

Take a hot bath or shower and soap repeatedly after chigger exposure. If you bathe quickly after exposure, then you can wash crawling chiggers off your body before they bite.

Apply creams or ointments such as hydrocortisone or calamine lotion to relieve itching temporarily.

Suggestions for Prevention:

Clear away brush and weeds, keep the grass cut close to the ground, and remove conditions which attract small animals that can serve as chigger hosts. This will reduce the amount of chiggers found in your area, since chiggers seldomly survive in areas that are well attended.

Wear tightly woven socks, long pants, long sleeved shirts, and high shoes when entering a potentially chigger infested area. Also tuck pant legs inside boots and button cuffs and collars as tightly as possible to prevent chiggers from climbing inside your clothes.

Apply repellents such as DEET or permethrin to both the skin and clothing, such as hands, legs, and waistband. Powdered sulphur is another repellent that can be dusted around the opening of your pants, socks, and boots or rubbed on skin such as over legs, arms and waist.

Suggestions For Use of Insecticides:

Insecticide sprays may provide some temporary reduction of chiggers and they are effective when applied in areas where chiggers and their animal hosts are living and/or roaming. Insecticides containing carbaryl, permethrin, cyfluthrin are some suggestions for control. Sprays should be made on grass, shrubs and the soil.

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