

UNIVERSITY STUDENT HEALTH SERVICES • Fact Sheet

CHIGGERS**WHAT ARE CHIGGERS?**

Chiggers are not insects but mites of the *Trombicula* species. They pass through four life stages: egg, larval, nymphal, and adult. It is the larva that bites humans and animals and is commonly referred to as a “chigger”. Chiggers are generally harmless but can cause a lot of itching.

- Larvae cannot be seen by the naked eye. Adults are 1-2 mm in length with a bright red or red-brown velvety appearance.
- Chiggers prefer long grasses that are 7-12 inches tall and shady areas. They are not very hardy in short grass and direct sun.
- Because chiggers do not penetrate or burrow into the skin, they are easily dislodged by rubbing or bathing.

WHEN DO THEY BITE?

- Chiggers usually bite during the late spring, summer, and early fall seasons when the air is moist and temperatures are above 60°F.
- Humans are accidental victims of chiggers. Most chiggers feed on reptiles and birds. They are attracted by the carbon dioxide that humans and animals exhale. After attaching to your skin, they feed for a variable amount of time then drop off.
- Chiggers can bite anywhere on the body, but they prefer to feed in areas where the skin is slightly thin, such as ankles, elbows, waistband areas, the groin, the genital area, and the skin behind the knees.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

- Chigger bites may appear as small red bumps or blisters, or they may look like hives.
- The bites tend to cluster, suggesting that chiggers migrate (travel) until they find a suitable place to feed.
- Bites are painless.
- Itching typically begins within hours after a bite and resolves over a few days.
- The bites will heal over 1-2 weeks.

HOW CAN I PREVENT CHIGGER BITES?

- Avoid long grass and shady areas when possible.
- Cover your skin.
 - Wear long pants, socks, and closed-toe shoes. Tuck pants into boots or socks.
 - Long-sleeve tops and a belt also help.
- If it is too hot to wear long clothing, stop every half hour and gently rub your skin and clothing to dislodge chiggers that may have jumped from the grass to you.
- Insect repellents can reduce your risk of chigger bites.
 - Apply DEET 25% to 35% or a picaridin-based insect repellent to exposed skin. Some brands include: Bull Frog (picaridin), Sawyer's (DEET), and Deep Woods Off (DEET). Avoid combination insect repellent and sunscreen products because you may need to apply the sunscreen more frequently than the insect repellent.
 - Permethrin spray is an insecticide that can be applied to clothing. Do not spray permethrin on your skin.

HOW CAN I PREVENT CHIGGER BITES? (continued)

- If you do not want to use an insect repellent, consider using sulfur powder (sulphur), which is available at local hiking stores, like REI Outfitters.
 - The powder can be sprinkled on the outside of your socks, boots, and pants.
 - Do not apply this product to your skin.
 - Sulfur powder may stain your clothing and oxidize metal. It also has a strong odor.
- Shower as soon as possible, and vigorously scrub your skin with a washcloth to remove potential larvae.
 - Soaking in a weak solution containing epsom salts can help dislodge chiggers.
 - 70% isopropyl rubbing alcohol can also be applied to the skin to remove chiggers.
- Wash clothing in hot water.
- Remove mosquito breeding areas (like standing water) around your home because adult chiggers feed on the eggs of mosquitoes and other small insects.
- Mow your lawn regularly.

HOW CAN I TREAT CHIGGER BITES?

- Treatment is aimed at decreasing itching and discomfort:
 - Antihistamines are commonly used to relieve symptoms.
 - Benadryl (diphenhydramine) and Chlor-Trimeton (chlorpheniramine maleate) are good products but may cause drowsiness.
 - Claritin (loratadine), Zyrtec (cetirizine), and Allegra (fexofenadine) are non-sedating alternatives that can be taken once daily.
 - Corticosteroid creams applied to the bites are also effective.
 - Hydrocortisone 1% cream is available over-the-counter. Stronger corticosteroid creams are available by prescription.
 - A thin layer of medication can be applied twice daily.
 - Overuse of these products can lead to thinning and whitening of the skin.
 - A variety of topical chigger compounds made of camphor, phenol, menthol, and eucalyptus are available in local pharmacies, outdoor equipment stores, and online.
 - Vicks VapoRub, which contains menthol, can also be effective.
 - Cool compresses may also help relieve itching and discomfort.
- Nail polish does not decrease itching or remove triggers.
- Avoid scratching the bites because this can lead to a bacterial skin infection. See your medical provider if you develop any signs of infection (such as pain, redness, swelling, warmth, and pus-like discharge).