

Chiggers: How to Prevent and Stop the Itch

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Being outside during the summertime can feel like a constant battle against nature and all the creepy crawly things. Mosquitos, ticks, and chiggers are some of the hardest pests to fight during this time of year.

A recent wild blackberry picking excursion left me covered in chigger bites and desperate for a solution to the uncontrollable urge to scratch. After doing some research, I found the following information from Mississippi State University Extension.



Chiggers, also called redbugs, have lots of myths surrounding them and how to go about treating their bites. These tiny bugs crawl up to the highest point on a plant and wait for an animal or person to walk by. When they fall onto a person, they typically land on shoes or lower pantlegs and begin to crawl up the body looking for a place to bite. Their ideal feeding grounds are on thin skin, which is why children and women make the perfect targets. They go for soft, light, and moist areas of the body where sun and weather haven't made the skin tough and dry.

Contrary to what many think, they do not burrow into the skin. Instead, they attach at the base of a hair follicle and inject digestive fluid into the skin. The fluid dissolves skin cells, chemically boring a hole into the skin. Our bodies' reaction to the saliva and digestive enzymes is to blame for the incessant urge to scratch.

Another common myth about treatment is how to "dry them out". The best solution to fight these pesky bugs and the reactions they cause is to bathe in hot, soapy water as soon as you can. Many do not notice bites immediately after being outside as they can take a while to settle down and attach. So even if you think you don't have any or only notice a spot or two, you can prevent a full feast by washing them away quickly. If left alone, chiggers can continue to eat for several days. To help combat the itching sensation, treat bites with calamine lotion or an antihistamine cream, or oral medication. Avoid harsh substances like nail polish or bleach as those can cause further irritation to the skin. If the bites are severe enough, physicians can prescribe anti-itch creams.

Chiggers do not carry diseases like ticks do. They are just incredibly annoying. Any infection that arises from chigger bites is likely due to excessive scratching, so it's important to fight the urge to scratch. Children are more prone to scratching so clip fingernails to a short length, repeatedly apply calamine lotion, and use antihistamines suitable for their age to help them heal more quickly.

To help reduce the likelihood of running into them, avoid tall grassy and brushy areas. If that's not possible, wear long pants, boots, and a lightweight long-sleeved shirt. Tuck pant legs into tall socks and apply a permethrin-based insect repellent to clothing - not directly to your skin.

Had I known all this before my recent berry-picking experience, I would have taken some precautions and probably prevented some discomfort. For more information, contact Cassidy Lutz at celutz@ksu.edu or by calling 620-625-8620.