

Coping with Chiggers

A Fact Sheet from Toxic Free NC

Itchy, red chigger bites are a common complaint for folks who spend time outdoors playing, walking, hiking or blueberry picking in the summertime. While the irritating blisters left by chigger bites are a nuisance, the rash will resolve itself in a few days without harsh treatments or folk remedies. Here are some tips for avoiding chiggers, and soothing the itch if they do bite you.

Contrary to popular opinion, chiggers do not burrow into your skin. Adult chiggers are microscopic, 6-legged mites that are harmless to humans. It is actually the juvenile chigger that crawls onto our legs outdoors, injecting an enzyme that dissolves a small outer layer of skin, allowing it to feed. This enzyme is what causes the itchy, red blisters that appear afterwards. If you are unsure about what is causing the blisters on your skin, see a health care provider. Because the chigger is not burrowing into your skin, common folk remedies such as “suffocating” the chigger with clear nail polish, or dabbing chemicals or alcohol onto the blisters will not help – but they may cause further irritation, so it’s best to be gentle with yourself and let the bites heal on their own.



Tucking your pants into your socks, though not exactly fashionable, is a smart way to prevent chigger bites.

Preventing bites

Chiggers are commonly found across the US from late spring until the fall frost. They live in tall grass or other wild vegetation that grows in open, sunny areas. Blueberry pickers commonly suffer exposure to chiggers. In order to prevent contact with chiggers, avoid tall grass in the summertime. If you will be outdoors in a chigger-infested area, wear closed shoes, socks, and long pants made from a tightly-woven fabric. Tucking your pants into your socks may not make the best fashion statement, but it can help keep you free from chigger bites. Wearing sandals, shorts, or loose clothing will leave you vulnerable to bites. Keep the grass in your yard mowed to keep chiggers away.

Insect repellents can also be somewhat effective against chiggers. Apply repellent to your clothes around the legs and ankles. Repellents containing citronella, eucalyptus and catnip oils are all effective in repelling chiggers (DEET is also effective, but it is more toxic to humans than many other kinds of repellent).

If you have stumbled into a grassy area unprotected, you should take quick action to dislodge the chiggers and prevent as many bites as you can. Take a shower right away to knock the chiggers off. Pay special attention to scrubbing the ankles, behind the knees, and around the crotch and waist (the waistband of your pants creates a barrier that usually stops chiggers from climbing higher). For children, scrub armpits carefully as well, since they are closer to the ground where chiggers live. Use warm, soapy water. Very hot water will irritate the bites, so be gentle. Be sure to launder the clothing you were wearing right away.

Soothing bites

If you have been exposed to chiggers, the bites usually become apparent as itchy, red blisters within 12 to 24 hours. The itching will last for a few days, and then disappear as the blisters heal on their own. Applying nail polish, chemicals or alcohol will do nothing to end the misery, however you can ease symptoms by taking antihistamines (like Benadryl) and applying corticosteroid creams or lotions (such as Hydrocortisone) to the blisters. Bathe or shower in lukewarm or warm water, using very gentle soaps. Soothing baths with mild itch-relief oils (such as colloidal oatmeal) may also ease some of the itching. As difficult as it sounds, do not scratch the blisters! Scratching sensitive areas will irritate the blisters and slow healing, and can even cause secondary infection if blisters are scratched open.

Chiggers are extremely annoying, but they do not carry disease in North America. By taking precautions when you are outdoors in tall grass, you should be able to avoid these irritating (but otherwise harmless) critters.