

Mythbusting - Chiggers and Ticks

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Are you creeped out by chiggers and ticks? Unlike mosquitoes, chiggers and ticks can't be swatted away. I grew up hearing information about chiggers and ticks that often left me confused and paranoid. This article will dispel some of those myths and give you some advice on how to manage these pests while you enjoy the summer outdoors.

Myth: Chiggers bury themselves into your skin so paint clear fingernail polish on them to kill them.

Chiggers or "red bugs" are the larvae of harvest mites. They prefer to feed on birds, reptiles and amphibians, so humans are accidental hosts. Due to the human immune reaction to a bite, the chigger cannot obtain enough food, so it gets dislodged or dies. A soapy shower can rid you of any attached chiggers.

Chiggers prefer to attach on parts of the body where clothing fits tightly or the flesh is thin, so bites are often found around the ankles, waistline, knees or armpits. Chigger bites produce a hardened, red welt that itches intensely 24 to 48 hours afterwards. Nonprescription local anesthetics and even meat tenderizer, studies have shown, can temporarily alleviate itching.

Protect yourself from chiggers by wearing protective clothing and using repellents containing DEET. Apply the repellent to your legs, ankles, cuffs, waist and sleeves of clothing or directly to your body.

Myth: Red bugs live in Spanish moss so don't touch it.

Although chiggers may take refuge in fallen Spanish moss, they are not in the moss in the trees. Chiggers are often found in low, damp areas with heavy vegetation, especially if there are a lot of rodents around. Chiggers occur in patches since a female lays eggs in one spot. They may be found in home lawns.

Mowing the lawn and cleaning up the landscape can reduce chiggers. You can find infested areas by placing a piece of black cardboard edgewise to the ground and see if they climb to the top. They look like tiny moving yellow or pink dots.

Like mites, ticks are closely related to spiders with the adults having eight legs. All stages feeds on blood. The larvae are often called "seed ticks" and look like a freckle. Ticks wait on grass in forested areas and grabs on when a suitable animal passes by. Seed ticks emerge all at once so you can get over 100 on you at the same time.

Before entering wooded areas, wear protective clothing, tuck your shirt in, and put your pants in your boots. After you get out, do a tick check of you and your pets. It is much easier to remove ticks while they are still crawling. You can get seed ticks off with duct tape or a linen roller.

Myth: Remove ticks by burning them with a match first.

Once a tick is embedded into your skin, the best way to remove it is to grasp the tick as close to the skin as possible using tweezers and pull straight back. The key is getting out the barbed mouthparts because if they are not removed, then toxins that could carry diseases can still be transmitted. You don't want to grab the abdomen of the tick since it will inject its gut contents in. The same is true by burning them with a match.

Myth: Most ticks carry Lyme disease.

Ticks are known to transmit serious diseases to humans and animals. The blacklegged deer tick is the primary vector of Lyme disease in the United States. Approximately 40-60 cases per year have been reported in Florida compared to over 4,000 in northeastern states. This is due to the ticks feeding primarily on lizards and reptiles in Florida, which do not carry the disease, rather than feeding on rodents.

Myth: If I get a bull's eye rash, then I have Lyme disease.

The first sign of Lyme disease in 70-80 percent of patients is a bull's eye rash, but also southern tick-associated rash illness vectored by the lone star tick can cause a similar rash. If you develop a rash, visit your doctor because antibiotics can treat early stages of infection.

Manage ticks using similar techniques as chiggers. Excluding wildlife around your home through fencing can also help. Lastly, you can treat the yard with synthetic pyrethroids or carbaryl, just avoid getting it into waterways.

You can find more information on chiggers and ticks at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu/>.