



Summer Safety Message

Protecting Yourself - Mosquitoes and Chiggers

Mosquitoes and West Nile Virus

West Nile Virus (WNV) infection is an illness transmitted to humans primarily by mosquitoes. West Nile virus (WNV) is a potentially serious illness. Experts believe WNV is established as a seasonal epidemic in North America that flares up in the summer and continues into the fall. WNV affects the central nervous system.

Flooded areas, particularly in warm climates, provide ideal conditions for mosquitoes to breed in stagnant water. Bites from infected mosquitoes may result in illnesses which range from mild flu-like conditions (West Nile fever) to severe and sometimes life-threatening diseases requiring hospitalization (West Nile encephalitis or meningitis). Approximately 80 percent of people who are infected with WNV will not show any symptoms at all. If you have symptoms of severe illness, seek immediate medical assistance.



Signs & Symptoms of West Nile Fever (mild illness)

- Headache, fever, body aches.
- Swollen lymph nodes, and/or a skin rash on the body.

Signs & Symptoms of West Nile Encephalitis or Meningitis (severe illness)

- Headache, high fever, stiff neck.
- Disorientation (in very severe cases, coma).
- Tremors, convulsions and muscle weakness (in very severe cases, paralysis).

Preventing Mosquito Exposure

- Reduce or eliminate mosquito breeding grounds (i.e., sources of stagnant or standing water).
- Cover as much skin as possible by wearing long-sleeved shirts, long pants and socks when possible.
- Avoid use of perfumes and colognes when working outdoors.
- Use an insect repellent containing DEET or Picaridin on skin that is not covered by clothing.
- Choose a repellent that provides protection for the amount of time that you will be exposed. The more DEET or Picaridin a repellent contains, the longer time it can protect you.
- Spray insect repellent on the outside of your clothing (mosquitoes can bite through thin clothing).
- Do NOT spray insect repellent on skin that is under clothing.
- Do NOT spray aerosol or pump products in enclosed areas or directly on your face. Do not allow insect repellent to contact your eyes or mouth. Do not use repellents on cuts, wounds or irritated skin.
- After working, use soap and water to wash skin and clothing that has been treated with insect repellent.
- Be extra vigilant from dusk to dawn when mosquitoes are most active.

Chiggers

Depending on where you live and how much time you spend outside, you may or may not be familiar with chiggers...

If your kids spend a lot of time outdoors in the spring and summer, either hiking, camping, or simply playing in the backyard or park, then you are likely just as familiar with chiggers as poison ivy and ticks. Or even if you don't know what a chigger is, you are probably familiar with the very annoying itchy red bumps that they leave behind.

Facts about Chiggers

Chiggers, which are also called harvest mites or red bugs, are very small and can not usually be seen without a magnifying glass or microscope. Their 'bite' also isn't usually noticeable, which is why you usually don't even know you were around chiggers until you start itching and notice the rash about 12 or 24 hours later.



Enlarged approximately 1,500 times, this chigger looks like the latest sci-fi movie star. In life, chiggers are red, but not from dining on blood as many people think. The larval form of a type of mite, chiggers are barely visible to the naked eye.

Once on your body, they typically move around looking for a good place to feed, which is usually a thin layer of skin. They will also begin to feed if they reach a barrier, such as the waistband of your clothes or your armpit.

But chiggers don't even really bite you in the traditional sense, like a mosquito does. Instead, they attach themselves to your skin, inject saliva with digestive enzymes that helps to break down your skin cells, which the chigger drinks. It is these enzymes that cause the itchy rash.

Although chiggers can stay attached to your skin for several days and continue eating, they are very easily brushed off and are usually knocked off once you begin to scratch the rash or take a shower or bath. That is why it can be a good idea to have your kids take a quick shower or bath after they have been playing outside in any type of 'wild' areas of your neighborhood. Another good reason is just so you can wash off any insect repellent that you had put on.

Myths about Chiggers

One of the biggest myths or misconceptions about chiggers is that they can burrow under your skin and drink your blood. This leads to the common treatment for chiggers of putting clear nail polish on chigger bites to suffocate the chiggers. Since chiggers don't actually burrow under your skin, this 'treatment' is unnecessary.

Treatments for Chigger Bites

While nail polish isn't a good treatment for chigger bites, anything that can help control the itching can be helpful, including:

- take a bath or shower as soon as possible after any possible exposure to chiggers
- apply your favorite OTC anti-itch medication, such as hydrocortisone, Calamine lotion, Sarna, oatmeal baths, etc.
- oral Benadryl
- a prescription strength steroid cream

Although chiggers in North America don't usually carry any diseases, the bites themselves can get infected.

Avoiding Chigger Bites

Since not going outside and being active is not good advice and unlike poison ivy, it is hard to spot and avoid chiggers, it is important to learn other ways to avoid chiggers and chigger bites. This can include avoiding wearing clothing that put you at risk for chigger bites, such as sandals without socks, sleeveless shirts, and shorts. Instead, wear long pants made of tightly woven fabric, long sleeved shirts, and high top boots or shoes. As an added defense, it can help to tuck your pant legs into your shoes or boots.

[Insect repellents](#) are another good way to help you avoid chiggers. In addition to applying it on your exposed skin, it can help to apply your insect repellent around your ankles, wrists, neck, and waist, which is where the chiggers often gain access to the rest of your body through your shoes, shirt, pants, and shoes.

Another good way to avoid chigger bites is to keep them out of your backyard, especially if your lawn is infested with chiggers. Since chiggers like high grass and weeds, keeping your lawn well groomed and treating the infested area with an insecticide may be helpful.

Chiggers vs. Chicken Pox

Although chigger bites are often more annoying than dangerous, one problem is that they are often confused with chicken pox. The fact that chigger bites are usually concentrated along a child's waist, ankles, neck, and arm pits, usually help to distinguish chigger bites from a mild case of chicken pox.