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Chiggers

Chiggers (also called harvest mites or red mites) are tiny red mites whose bites aren't painful but do cause intense itching shortly after the bite occurs.

Chiggers are smaller than a period at the end of a sentence (most can only be seen with a magnifying glass). These members of the arachnid family are found all over, including in grassy fields, along lakes and streams, and in forests. It's the baby chiggers (or larvae) that bite people and animals.

About Chigger Bites

Chiggers have tiny claws that allow them to attach tightly to people and animals. Once attached, they pierce the skin and inject their saliva, which contains digestive juices that dissolve skin cells. Chiggers then consume the dissolved cells and fall off after a few days, leaving a red welt on the skin.

These itchy red bumps (which can look like pimples, blisters, or small hives) are typically found around the waist, ankles, or in warm skin folds. They get bigger and itchier over several days, and often appear in groups.



Extreme itching begins within hours of the chigger attaching to the skin. The itch resolves after a few days, and the red bumps heal over 1-2 weeks.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Doctors can diagnose chigger bites just by looking at them and getting a little information about your child's recent outdoor activities.

No specific medications are designed to treat chigger bites, but calamine lotion, anti-itch cream, and/or cool compresses can help with the itching. Washing bites vigorously with soap and water usually helps to remove any chiggers that are still attached to the skin.

Discourage your child from scratching the bites because this can lead to:

- impetigo, a bacterial infection of the skin, with pus and crusts around the bites
- a larger area of increasing redness, swelling, pain, and warmth, called cellulitis

Keeping fingernails short can help your child resist scratching the bites. Antibiotics may be required if a skin infection does occur.

When to Call the Doctor

Call if the itchiness doesn't improve with over-the-counter remedies or if the scratching has led to an infection of the bite (watch for warmth, redness, swelling, tenderness, or pus).

Some boys who have chigger bites on the penis develop an acute hypersensitivity reaction known as "summer penile syndrome," which causes swelling of the penis, itching, and painful urination. Doctors might prescribe antihistamines and recommend cool compresses to treat this problem.

Protecting Kids From Chiggers

Insect repellents that contain 10%-30% DEET are most effective at preventing chigger bites. When possible, dress kids in long-sleeved shirts and long pants that are tucked in when they'll be playing outside, especially if they'll be hiking or playing in fields. Have them take a hot shower after returning indoors and wash their clothes in hot water. Clothes also can be treated with a specific insecticide to help prevent bites.

Chiggers aren't contagious, so kids don't need to refrain from activities unless the itching makes them too uncomfortable to participate.

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Date reviewed: December 2011



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Note: All information is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.