

*Just the Facts...* A “chigger” is a type of mite which feeds on birds, reptiles, amphibians, mammals, and humans. There are about 20 species of chigger mites around the world that are known to feed on humans, and of those, only two species are known to bite humans in the United States. Chiggers live in a range of habitats from meadows to swampy areas, but are most common in grassy or scrubby vegetation, shaded areas, leaf litter, rotten logs, and stumps.

## What do chiggers look like?

Chiggers are the immature stage of a mite in the family Trombiculidae. The chigger mite has a lifecycle similar to a tick, and begins with eggs laid by adults that hatch into 6-legged larvae, which develop into 8-legged nymphs, and finally adults. This is important because unlike ticks, which can transmit diseases during any life stage, **only the chigger larvae bite humans**. Chigger larvae are extremely small (1/100 to 1/120 inch in diameter), and will appear red, orange, or yellow through a magnifying glass. To the naked eye, chiggers will appear as small red dots moving along the body. The larvae are active from early spring through late fall. Chigger nymphs and adults do not bite humans; instead they feed on small, soil-dwelling insects and insect eggs. Adult chigger mites are figure-eight shaped and covered in dense red, yellow, or orange hairs. Adults are active in the fall, overwinter in the soil, and lay eggs early in the spring.



A magnified image of a chigger larva, with a close-up of the claws and blade-like chelicerae.  
Photo: D. Nielsen, ESB, PHC Atlantic

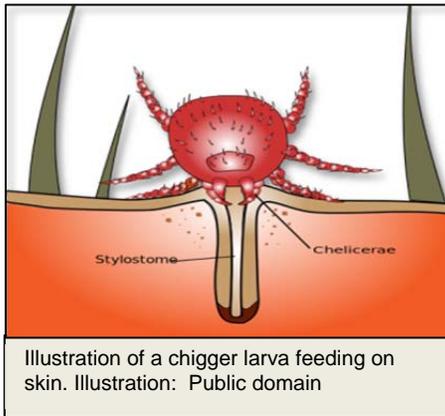


Illustration of a chigger larva feeding on skin. Illustration: Public domain

## How do chiggers bite?

Using large claws located near their mouths, chigger larvae quickly attach to any exposed skin that comes in contact with infested grass or soil in vegetated areas. The larvae then create a cut in the skin with knife-like mouthparts called chelicerae and inject an enzyme into the cut that digests the skin at the bite site. This makes the cells around the bite site harden into a “drinking straw”, or stylostome, which the chigger uses to suck up the liquefied tissue. Chigger larvae will feed for several hours and then drop off the host to find a sheltered place to digest the meal. Skin stays irritated by the digestive enzyme long after the chigger finishes feeding and detaches.



Reaction to bites from chigger larvae.  
Photo: © 2014 WebMD, LLC.

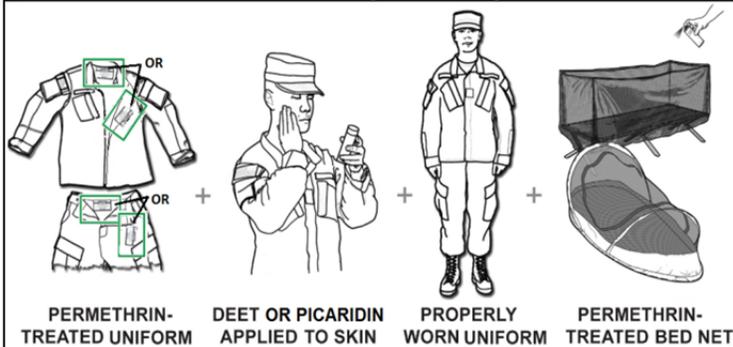
## Can chigger bites make me sick?

In the United States, chiggers do not transmit diseases, but feeding larvae can cause extreme skin irritation. In parts of Southeast Asia, chiggers transmit scrub typhus, a potentially life-threatening bacterial disease in humans. Scrub typhus can cause welts, swelling, and fever within several hours of chigger exposure. Seek medical attention if you think you may have been exposed to scrub typhus.

## What are the signs and symptoms of chigger bites?

Chiggers prefer to bite skin where clothing fits tightly, such as around waistlines, sock lines, and behind the knees. Skin begins to itch approximately 1-3 hours after being bitten by chigger larvae. The skin will eventually develop itchy, red or puss-filled bumps at the site of attachment which can be extremely irritating. The itching persists for up to a week, and complete healing of the skin lesions can take up to 2 weeks.

## DoD Insect Repellent System



**Use ALL elements for maximum protection!**

Using all elements of the DoD Insect Repellent System provides maximum and safe protection from chiggers. Diagram: VID, APHC

## How do I reduce my chances of getting bitten by chiggers?

The best defense against chiggers is to avoid them. Chigger infestations are less common in maintained lawns and landscaped environment. Avoid sitting or lying on the ground in chigger habitat. Do not walk barefoot in chigger habitat areas, and cover your skin to limit access to your feet, ankles, and legs. Wear loose-fitting, tightly-woven fabrics to help minimize chiggers moving through clothing.

**Use the DoD Insect Repellent System for maximum protection from chigger bites.** This system incorporates permethrin repellent on the uniform, DEET or picaridin repellent on exposed skin, a properly-worn uniform and sleeping inside a permethrin-treated bed net. To keep chiggers on the outside of your clothing, tuck pant legs inside boots, and fasten your cuffs snugly at the wrist.

## What standard military insect repellent products can be used to repel chiggers on exposed skin?

Approved military insect repellents for use on exposed skin come in a variety of formulations. Always refer to the label to determine frequency of repellent application based on activity. **Do not apply repellent to eyes, lips or sensitive/damaged skin.** Available military-approved repellents are:

- **Ultrathon™** (NSN 6840-01-284-3982) contains 33% controlled-release DEET lotion; one application protects for 12 hours.
- **Ultra 30™ Insect Repellent Lotion** (NSN 6840-01-584-8393) contains 30% Lipo DEET; one application protects up to 12 hours.
- **Cutter® pump spray** (NSN 6840-01-584-8598) contains 25% DEET; one application protects for up to 10 hours.
- **Sunsect** combination sunscreen and repellent (NSN 6840-01-288-2188) contains 20% DEET with SPF 15 sun protection.
- **Natrapel® pump spray** (NSN 6840-01-619-4795) contains 20% picaridin; one application protects for up to 8 hours.
- **Chigg-Away® lotion** (NSN 6804-01-137-8456) contains 10% precipitated sulfur and 5% benzocaine, repels chiggers.



All standard approved insect repellents for use on exposed skin are registered by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (USEPA). These products are safe to use and effectively repel mosquitoes, sand flies, fleas, ticks, chiggers and other potential disease vectors and pests. Photo: VID, APHC

## How do I treat chigger bites?

Chigger bites can be extremely irritating and uncomfortable. A hot shower or bath can provide some relief if done early in the itching phase. Once a pustule (bump) has formed, do not scratch it to avoid opening the bite to possible infection. Scrub your skin vigorously with a washcloth to dislodge any mites that may have settled there recently. The sooner you take a shower, the more likely it is to provide relief from skin reactions to chigger bites. **Note: bites will remain irritated for days after the chiggers are gone.** Kill any remaining larvae on clothing by washing in hot (125°F), soapy water for at least half an hour. Do not wear clothing previously worn in chigger areas until it has been properly laundered. Ointments containing benzocaine, hydrocortisone, calamine lotion, or other products recommended by your doctor may help temporarily relieve itching from chigger bites. Never apply household products such as kerosene, turpentine, ammonia, alcohol, gasoline, salt, or dry cleaning fluid on affected areas.

## What can I do to prevent chiggers from infesting my yard?

Chiggers quickly dry out and die from water loss in areas with short vegetation. You can make your yard less attractive to chiggers by mowing your lawn and keeping other plants trimmed.