Chiggers

What are Chiggers?
Chiggers are tiny, red mites, which are members of the arachnid family (like spiders and ticks). They live all over the outdoors, including grassy areas, in forests, and along lakes and streams. They are so tiny that they are rarely seen with the naked eye. Rather their presence is more likely to be felt by the intensely itchy welts caused by their bites.

What happens when chiggers bite? Chiggers have tiny claws that they use to attach to the surface of tender skin, such as on your ankles, the backs of your knees, around the crotch, under the beltline, and in the armpits. They insert a feeding structure into the skin and inject enzymes that destroys tissue that they then feed on. The most common symptom of a chigger bite is itching. Contrary to popular belief, the chiggers do not burrow into the skin, after a couple of days, the chigger falls off. Your body respond to this with an itchy allergic reaction that often occur within hours of attaching to the skin. They often appear in groups, and get bigger and itchier over several days. Chigger bites are itchy red bumps that can look like blisters, pimples, or small hives. The itch will stop after a few days, then the red bumps heal over 1-2 weeks. Chigger bites themselves won’t cause any long term complications, as unlike mosquitoes and tick bites, they are not known to carry diseases. However scratching the bites can lead to skin wounds that can become infected.

How do I treat chigger bites? Chigger bites can usually be treated at home. Wash the bite vigorously with soap and water to remove any remaining chiggers still attached to the skin. Applying cool compresses to the bites may provide some relief from the itching. Over the counter medications for itching such as calamine lotion or corticosteroid creams may help to control the itching. In addition, an over the counter antihistamine may help to block the body’s allergic response to the bite.

When should I contact a health care provider?
- If you suspect your bites are becoming infected, watch for warmth, redness, swelling, tenderness, or pus.
- If over the counter treatments are not helping with the itching

A health care provider can usually diagnose chigger bites by looking at them and asking about your recent outdoor activities. There are not specific medications to treat chigger bites, but they can recommend medications for you to try, or prescribe an antibiotic if the bites appear to be infected.

How to I protect myself from chigger bites? The best way to protect yourself against chigger bites is to limit your potential exposure to chiggers and their bites.
- If you are outdoors and feel that you may be exposed, proper outdoor clothing can serve as protection. Long sleeved shirts and long pants tucked into thick socks or boots can help protect against all biting insects, from mosquitoes to chiggers.
- Insect repellents that contain DEET applied to skin and clothing can help to repel chiggers.
- After you are outdoors, washing skin and clothing with soap and water can help to remove any remaining chiggers.