

Chiggers (also called harvest mites or red bugs) are mites, not insects. They are closely related to spiders and ticks. Like most mites, chiggers are extremely small and are barely visible to the naked eye. They occur mostly on wild animals, but can be a nuisance to people. Here are some facts about chiggers.

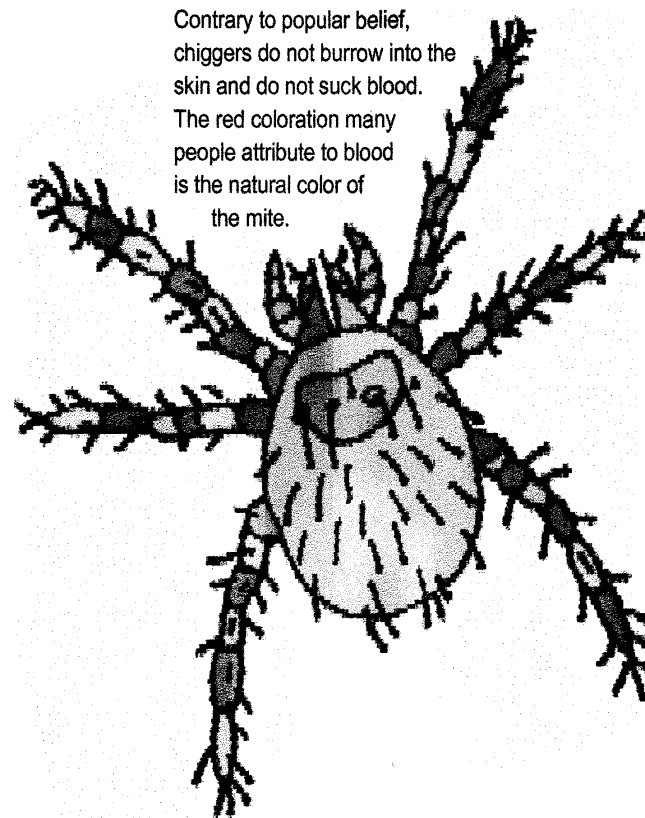
CHIGGER BIOLOGY

Chiggers are very small mites that are usually a yellowish to bright red color. They have four life stages — egg, larva, nymph and adult. Adult chiggers lay eggs in the spring. The 6-legged larva hatches from the egg. Only the larval stage bites animals or people. The larva then changes into the nymph, which soon becomes an adult. Nymphs and adults are 8-legged. They feed on small insects or insect eggs and do not bite.

In North Carolina, chiggers may live year-round but are especially active during spring

and summer. Chiggers live on leaves, shrubs and in wooded areas, pastures, pine straw and tall grass and weeds.

The parasitic larvae can be found feeding on wild mammals, birds, reptiles, and domestic animals.



Contrary to popular belief, chiggers do not burrow into the skin and do not suck blood. The red coloration many people attribute to blood is the natural color of the mite.

After hatching, the larvae climb vegetation and seek out hosts. After finding a host, the larvae attach to the skin and begin feeding. They inject a fluid that

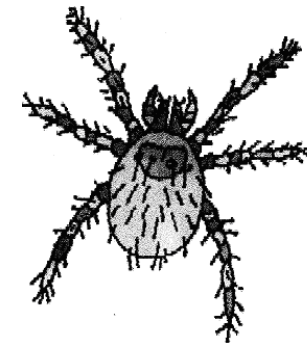
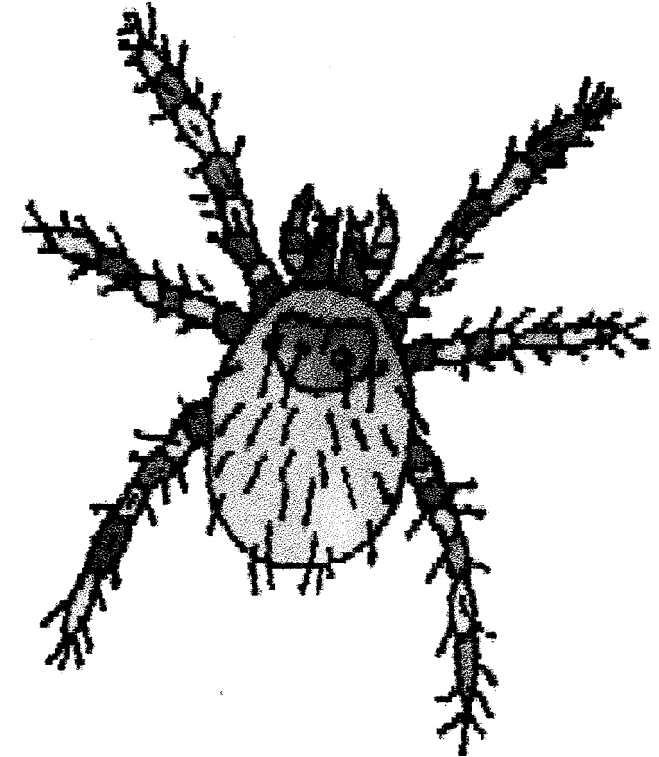
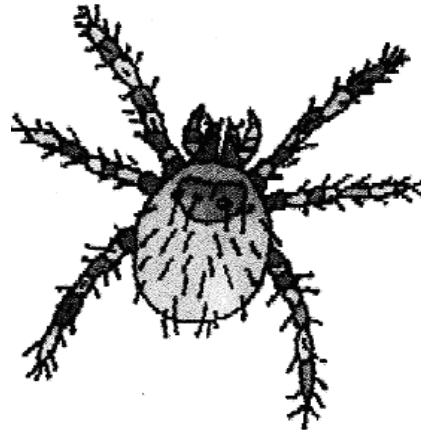
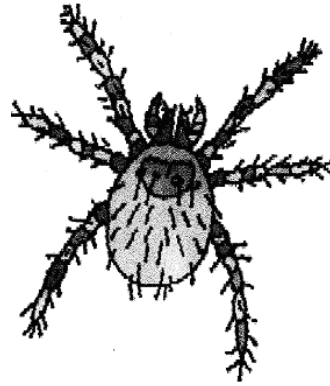
breaks down skin cells. Then they feed on the liquefied skin by sucking up the fluid. After feeding from a few hours to a few days, the chiggers eventually fall off the host.

When chiggers bite people, they usually attack areas of the body where the skin is thin and/or wrinkled. This includes the ankles and wrists, the waistline, the crease of the elbow, groin, armpits and the back of knees. Chigger bites become annoying after several hours. The skin may appear red and develop intense itching at the site of the bite. In some cases, welts, swelling and dermatitis can also develop and last for several days. Scratching can cause secondary infection. Although their bites can be severely annoying, chiggers in this country do not transmit any diseases.

Treatments to ease itching include ointments like calamine lotion, hydrocortisone, benzocaine or other medications recommended by your doctor or pharmacist. You reduce the chance of secondary infection and ease the itching by not scratching.

PREVENTION

Avoiding areas where chiggers live is the best way to prevent chigger bites, if you are outside where chiggers are likely to live, repellents that contain permethrin or DEET reduce chigger bites. Although chiggers can penetrate many types of clothing, wearing boots, long pants and long sleeves can help. Wearing clothes that are made from tightly woven fabrics also helps. Tuck pant cuffs into socks or boots and tuck shirt into pants to keep chiggers away from the skin. As soon as possible after exposure to chiggers, take a bath in hot soapy water to remove them and wash clothes in hot soapy water to kill remaining mites. Cool water may not kill the mites. Around your home, mowing tall grass and weeds can reduce chigger habitat. If infestations are particularly heavy, spraying areas where chiggers live may reduce the problem. If you choose to use a pesticide remember to follow label instructions carefully.



Chiggers! Chiggers!

Contact your
Local Health Department
or the
North Carolina Department of Environment
and Natural Resources
Public Health Pest Management
Section in Raleigh
at
(919) 733-6407



Revised 6/06

...Some Facts