



# JIGGERS

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Jiggers, not to be confused with chiggers, is a dermatologic infiltration by a flea called *Tunga penetrans*. The name jiggers comes from the synonym for the causative flea, the jigger flea, and is one of many synonyms. Today, many health professionals refer to jiggers by its more formal name of tungiasis.

Jiggers is a very old condition that has been described as far back as Christopher Columbus' days in 1492. There is no predilection of Jiggers to anyone and it can occur in people young to old, male or female, and every other type of individual regardless of race. Classically it has been described to be relatively common among Caribbean nations, but does occur in other tropical or subtropical places throughout the world in sandy environments.

The lifecycle of the jigger flea occurs in sandy environments. After the jigger flea develops into adult form, male and female fleas will forage on warm-blooded animals or humans for a tasty banquet of blood. Although males and females feed on blood, only the females burrow into the skin which primarily causes the symptoms associated with tungiasis. Since the fleas cannot jump very far, the most common areas of involvement are the feet where direct contact with fleas occurs. Specifically, the skin part of the toe surrounding the nail is the most common site. However, the webs of the toes or soles of the feet can also be involved.

Initially, a little black spot appears where the female burrows into the skin. At this point, infected individuals don't usually notice any symptoms or other signs that they are infected. After a short time, perhaps a few days, a small white bump will develop in the spot where the female invaded the skin. The bump will progressively get larger, and an area of redness and inflammation will occur around the white bump. During this stage, the patient usually develops some itching and pain. As the female resides in the skin, she continues to lay eggs over about a two-week period and then dies. The death of the female flea is marked by a black scab or crust covering the initial point of entry into the skin. Due to the invasive nature of the flea, infection with bacteria or other microbes can occur and result in complications. The worst and most dreaded complication is rampant infection requiring amputation.

Although most people can recover from the infestation and heal without having any treatment, the signs and symptoms can mimic other ailments (like plantar **warts** for instance), so people usually seek treatment. Also, most people prefer to be cured from the invasion instead of waiting. A sterile needle can be used to remove the fleas from the skin when the infestation has recently occurred. Other more invasive procedures like surgery may be indicated at later stages, especially if there are other complications from the flea invasion. Patients should make sure they are up to date on their tetanus vaccination. Oral or topical medications can help alleviate symptoms and help recover from infection faster. People can prevent infection by covering their feet or not directly contacting the sand when in areas known to have jigger fleas.

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