

SWIMMER'S ITCH

PERSONAL HEALTH FACT SHEET

What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch is an illness that presents with itching and a rash. It is caused by the larvae of a schistosome worm that penetrates the skin. The primary carriers and transmitters of this schistosome worm are ducks, geese, gulls, swans, muskrats, and beavers. Humans can be exposed to the larvae when wading or swimming in contaminated lakes and streams, especially along shallow shorelines.

How is Swimmer's Itch spread?

Swimmer's itch is spread by direct contact with water that is contaminated with the larvae. **It cannot be spread from person to person.** The itch can be very annoying, but does not usually result in serious illness.

How is it treated?

If you find yourself itching after swimming:

- Get out of the water and towel-off briskly; this helps to remove the tiny larvae which cause the itch.
- Shower as soon as possible after a swim.
- Treatment is supportive only, with over the counter anti-itching ointments or creams, cool compresses, baking soda paste, and soaking in a bath of epsom salts, baking soda, or colloidal oatmeal.
- In cases of severe or persistent itching, see your doctor for additional treatment.

How can we prevent Swimmer's Itch?

Avoid still pools of water during the mid-summer and fall months, especially on warm days. Such pools, and other waterways which have a high number of ducks, geese, or shorebirds plus snails, have a higher chance of being contaminated with the larvae.

Do not feed ducks and geese. Feeding ducks and geese brings them close to shore where they can spread the disease. Do not swim or wade in shallow marshy areas where snails are found.

SYMPTOMS OF SWIMMER'S ITCH

- occur minutes to days after swimming.
- a dull prickly sensation as the larvae burrow into the skin
- small red spots or blisters appear on the skin which begins to tingle, burn, or itch.
- severity of the rash can vary from person to person
- symptoms are usually gone within a week as larvae die
- symptoms can increase in severity with repeated infestation
- scratching may cause the rash to become infected

Content adapted from Washtenaw County Public Health Department

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