



Central Michigan District Health Department
“Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities”

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Swimmer’s Itch

What is Swimmer’s Itch?

This is an allergic reaction the body has to a very small free-swimming bug which gets under one’s skin causing a rash. The adult parasite exists in waterfowl, such as ducks, geese, gulls and others, as well as in certain aquatic animals such as muskrat and beaver. The eggs produced by the adult parasite develop in the intestinal tract of its host and are excreted into the water by the bird or animal. The eggs hatch into a small “wiggler” form which swim in search of the second host – a particular species of snail. If the particular species of snail is not found in the water, or if the wiggler does not find it, the wiggler dies. If the wiggler finds the proper species of snail, it penetrates the tissues of the snail and then undergoes a number of developmental changes to emerge from the snail in a slightly larger free-swimming form. It then proceeds to look for its appropriate host (duck, goose, beaver, etc.). After finding this host, it penetrates the skin and develops into the mature adult parasite to repeat the cycle.

While man is not a natural host, humans become involved accidentally. When a swimmer leaves the water, a certain amount of water remains on the skin. As this water evaporates or runs off, wigglers that are present quickly burrow into the skin. Because the skin and tissue is not a suitable environment for development of these parasites, the wigglers die. The presence of this foreign protein material under the skin sets up an allergic type of reaction, resulting in the rash and itch.

What is the environment of Swimmer’s Itch?

The host snails are fairly abundant in many lakes and marshes throughout the Northwest. They are not common in streams. Infected snails are apt to occur most frequently in ponds, lakes, or marshes that are frequented by wild waterfowl, and because of the migratory habits of these birds, the parasite is widely spread.

The shedding of wigglers by the snails occurs June through October; the incidence of Swimmer’s Itch seems to be highest during the middle of the summer. Wigglers emerge from one species of snail usually during the mid-morning period, but in another species, the wigglers come out chiefly in the later afternoon and evening. The wigglers live in the free-swimming state for about 48 hours after emergence from the snails, so they are present to attack swimmers at all hours.

What are the symptoms?

Within five minutes to 48 hours after leaving the water, the person may experience a sharp burning and itching of the skin affected, which may occur on any part of the body exposed. However, the burning and itching of the skin does not usually occur on the face, palms or soles of the feet. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours and a zone of redness may surround these. On the second day,

some of these pimples may become small blisters and in some cases, the blisters may become pustules. Intermittent periods of itching may last 4-5 days. Swimmer's Itch cannot be spread from person to person.

What can I do to relieve the itching?

The itching is intense and causes considerable scratching. The application of calamine lotion and the administration of an anti-histamine, such as Benedryl may control this to some extent. Applying baking soda paste to the affected area or soaking in a bath sprinkled with Epsom salts, oatmeal or baking soda may also help. For further advice on treatment, please consult your physician.

How can I prevent getting Swimmer's Itch?

Since it is difficult to use chemical treatment on lakes, other measures can provide some degree of success in preventing the "itch". Simply removing the water from the body **immediately** after getting out of the water (brisk toweling, showering, and wiping it off with the palms of the hands) may reduce the incidence of the problem. In addition, some swimmers have had moderate success in preventing Swimmer's Itch by applying a good waterproof sunscreen prior to entering the water. (Many substances that claim to be waterproof offer little protection. The best choice would be waterproof sunscreen made for diving and other heavy-duty uses). In addition, avoid swimming in waters with a history of swimmer's itch, avoid shallow waters and shorelines, don't feed birds on docks or those near swimming areas.