



Central Michigan District Health Department

Promoting Healthy Families, Healthy Communities



Jennifer Morse, MD, MPH, FAAFP
Medical Director

Steve Hall, RS, MS
Health Officer

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 the blood of infected animals such as ducks, geese, gulls and swans, as well as in certain mammals such as muskrats and raccoons. 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 releasing larvae 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 larvae does not find it, death occurs. If the larva 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 different type of microscopic larva. This larval form then swims about searching for a suitable host, to continue the life 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, larvae that are present quickly burrow into the skin. Because the skin and tissue is not a suitable environment for development of these parasites, the larvae 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 are the symptoms?

Within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water, a person may experience burning, tingling, 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. 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 up to 7 days. Swimmer's Itch cannot be spread from person to person.

How is it spread?

Swimmer's itch is not spread person to person.

What is the treatment?

Most cases of swimmer's itch can be managed at home. For relief, try the following:

- Use corticosteroid cream
- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas
- Bathe in Epsom salts or baking soda
- Soak in oatmeal bath
- Use anti-itch lotion

Please visit us at our website www.cmdhd.org

How can I prevent getting Swimmer's 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, avoid swimming in waters with a history of swimmer's itch, avoid shallow waters and shorelines, and do not feed birds where people are likely to swim.