

What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch, also known as duck itch (the medical term is *Schistosoma cercarial dermatitis*), is an allergic reaction when the larvae of a water snail parasite gets into the surface layer of the skin.

Although swimmer's itch may not be a problem every summer, the condition often occurs during the first round of warm weather in early summer. On some lakes, the condition may only affect swimmers once, while the effects can persist throughout the summer. The parasite larvae cannot live out of water, and they in fact die immediately after contacting the skin. The skin's reaction to the contact is not due to an infection created by the parasite, but is merely an inflammatory reaction.

The presence of swimmer's itch does not indicate that a lake is polluted. The snails and birds that carry the parasite are part of the diverse natural environment of the lake and sometimes conditions are particularly conducive to these bothersome, itch-generating parasites.

Symptoms from exposure

Symptoms, include itchy, raised red spots, that form when the larvae enters the surface layer of the skin. The inflammation commonly occurs within 30 minute to several hours following exposure. While the small red spots do not generally last more than a week, they will continue to increase in size during the first 24-30 hours after exposure.

Children, whose skin may be more sensitive, can develop a more serious case of swimmer's itch if they may swim more regularly, and play near the water's edge where the larvae may be more concentrated.

What to do if you get swimmer's itch

To minimize the chance of getting swimmers itch, shower and towel off briskly after swimming. While this may help for some varieties of the larvae, in most cases, when the skin's surface has already been penetrated, the showering and toweling may not be sufficient. Any treatment you

would use for poison ivy will generally be useful for treating swimmer's itch and some topical creams may help reduce the swelling. Orally administered antihistamines are sometimes prescribed to treat swimmer's itch and similar allergic skin reactions. If you have a serious case of swimmer's itch, you should see a doctor and ask for a prescription to relieve the itching. If you get swimmer's itch, please feel free to report this to the Department of Public Health, Madison and Dane County by calling (608) 266-4821.

What to do to prevent swimmer's itch

- Avoid swimming for long periods in shallow water
- Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a problem and where there is wind blowing toward the shore.
- Do not make the swimming area attractive to birds by feeding them
- Water-resistant topical applications of the common insect repellent DEET may prevent Swimmer's itch
- Some commercially available products are available (for an example of one of these products, check the following website at www.swimmersitchguard.com for more information).

While there are strategies to help prevent swimmers itch involving controlling the snail population, some can have unintended negative effects on aquatic ecosystems that are not well understood.