



Frequently asked questions about Swimmers Itch

From the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency
Division of Environmental Health

What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch appears as a **skin rash** caused by an allergic reaction to parasites found in some birds and mammals. These parasites are released from infected snails into fresh and salt water (such as lakes, ponds, and oceans). The parasite burrows into a nearby swimmer's skin, causing an allergic reaction and rash. Swimmer's itch is found throughout the world and is more frequent during summer months.

How does water become infested with the parasite?

The adult parasite lives in the blood of infected animals such as ducks, geese, gulls, swans, and certain water mammals such as muskrats and beavers. The parasites produce eggs that are passed in the feces of infected birds or mammals.

What are the signs and symptoms of swimmer's itch?

Symptoms of swimmer's itch may include:

- tingling, burning, or itching of the skin
- small reddish pimples
- small blisters

Within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water, you may **experience tingling, burning, or itching of the skin**. Small reddish pimples appear within twelve hours. Pimples may develop into small blisters. Scratching the areas may result in bacterial infections. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away.

Because swimmer's itch is caused by an allergic reaction to infection, the more often you swim or wade in contaminated water, the more likely you are to develop more serious symptoms. The greater the number of exposures to contaminated water, the more intense and immediate symptoms of swimmer's itch will be. Be aware that swimmer's itch is not the only rash that may occur after swimming in fresh **and** salt water.

Do I need to see my health care provider for treatment?

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require medical attention. If you have a rash, you may try the following for relief:

- Use corticosteroid cream
- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas
- Bathe in Epsom salts or baking soda
- Soak in oatmeal baths, such as Aveeno
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash (made by stirring water into baking soda until it reaches a paste-like consistency)

- Use an anti-itch lotion, such as Calamine lotion

Though difficult, try not to scratch. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected. If itching is severe, you will want to see your health care provider. They may suggest prescription-strength lotions or creams to lessen your symptoms.

Can swimmer's itch be spread from person-to-person?

No. Swimmer's itch is not contagious and cannot be spread from one person to another.

Who is at risk for swimmer's itch?

Anyone who swims or wades in infested water may be at risk. Larvae are more likely to be present in shallow water by the shoreline. Children are most often affected because they tend to swim, wade, and play in the shallow water more than adults. Also, they are less likely to towel dry themselves when leaving the water.

Once an outbreak of swimmer's itch has occurred in water, will the water always be unsafe?

No. Many factors must be present for swimmer's itch to become a problem in water. Since these factors can change (sometimes within a swim season), swimmer's itch may not always be a problem. However, there is no way to know how long water may be unsafe.

Is it safe to swim in my swimming pool?

Yes. As long as your swimming pool is well maintained and chlorinated, there is no risk of swimmer's itch.

How can I prevent getting swimmer's itch?

To reduce the likelihood of developing swimmer's itch

1. Do not swim in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water.
2. Do not swim near or wade in marshy areas where snails are commonly found.
3. Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water.
4. Do not attract birds (e.g., by feeding them) to areas where people are swimming.

For further information on protecting yourself from recreational water illnesses, please visit <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/index.htm>

For more information about swimmers itch or other any other health department information, visit us on the web at:

www.bhsj.org

Or call your local Health Department office at:

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