

Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency

June 7, 2011

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Got an Itch?

Got an itch? It might not be what you think. Step aside, ticks. Move over, poison ivy. Get out of the way, mosquitoes. You may have thought those were the chief causes of summer itching, but there is another cause – **swimmer's itch**. The Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency is receiving complaints of swimmer's itch being present in local lakes. Swimmer's itch, also called cercarial dermatitis, appears as a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to certain parasites that infect some birds and mammals. These microscopic parasites are released from infected snails into fresh water (such as lakes and ponds). While the parasite's preferred host is the specific bird or mammal, if the parasite comes into contact with a swimmer, it burrows into the skin causing an allergic reaction and rash. Swimmer's itch can be found in any Michigan lake, but is more frequent during summer months when water temperatures rise.

The signs and symptoms of swimmer's itch can show up in a matter of minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water. If you get swimmer's itch, you may **experience tingling, burning, or itching of the skin**. Small reddish pimples may appear within twelve hours. These pimples may develop into small blisters. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away.

Swimmer's itch is not contagious and does not spread from person to person. In most cases, swimmer's itch does not require medical attention. If you have a rash, you may try the following home treatments or remedies to seek 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

However, if scratching the infected area results in secondary bacterial infections you should seek medical attention.

The best way to avoid swimmer's itch is to:

- Not swim in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem.
- Not swim near or wade in marshy areas or shallow inshore waters where snails are commonly found.
- Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water.
- Not attract birds (e.g., by feeding them) to areas where people are swimming.

Rebecca Burns, Environmental Health Director for the tri-county health department cautions "Not everyone who is exposed to the parasite will necessarily develop swimmers' itch. Repeated exposure, however, increases sensitivity to the parasite and the likelihood of contracting the disease," She went on to add that children are often infected with swimmers' itch since they typically wade in and out of shallow water where the organism is predominately found and play on the beach as water evaporates on their skin.

For more information on swimmer's itch or other environmental concerns, check out the Branch-Hillsdale-St. Joseph Community Health Agency's website at www.bhsj.org.

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