

SWIMMER'S ITCH

What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch is an allergic reaction when the larvae of a water snail parasite get into the surface layer of the skin. The condition often occurs during the first round of warm weather in early summer. The season is relatively short – usually four to six weeks, depending on the weather.

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

Swimmer's itch is neither dangerous nor contagious, but it is very uncomfortable. The degree of discomfort and bodily reaction varies with the person's sensitivity and the degree of infestation. Symptoms, include itchy, raised red spots, that form when the larvae enters the surface layer of the skin. The inflammation commonly occurs within 30 minutes to several hours following exposure. While the 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 swim more regularly, and play near the water's edge where the larvae may be more concentrated.

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 the wind is blowing toward the shore.
- * Stay clear of plants growing in the lake.
- * If possible, swim offshore.
- * Towel off briskly after leaving the water. This can crush the organisms before they can penetrate the skin.
- * Shower shortly after leaving the water and before your skin dries.
- * Do not make the swimming area attractive to birds by feeding them.
- * Waterproof sunscreens and lotions may reduce the infections.
- * 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 swimmer's itch involving controlling the snail population, some can have unintended negative effects on aquatic ecosystems that are not well understood.

What to Do if You Get Swimmer's Itch

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.

More Information

For more information on swimmer's itch, please visit the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources website: <http://dnr.wi.gov/lakes/swimmersitch/>.

This information is provided by the Joint Rock Lake Committee in consultation with the Jefferson County Health Department, and the Jefferson County Land and Water Conservation Department.