

Swimmer's Itch

(*cercarial dermatitis, shistosome dermatitis*)



Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by tiny parasites found in water. The parasite normally infects birds or mammals that live near water, but sometimes can find a human and cause an allergic reaction. Outbreaks begin to occur when the weather and water gets warmer. They are most common in May to early July in southern Wisconsin lakes and late June to early July in northern Wisconsin lakes. Swimmer's itch is not dangerous and cannot be spread from person to person, but it can be very uncomfortable.



What causes it?

- ▶ People get swimmer's itch when the parasites burrow into their skin. The parasites are unable to live in a human and soon die.
- ▶ The dead remains of the parasite under the skin are what cause people to have an allergic reaction called swimmer's itch.
- ▶ This can happen when someone air dries after being in water where the parasite is living. Air drying gives the parasite time to burrow into the skin.
- ▶ Anyone can get swimmer's itch. Children are more likely to get swimmer's itch than adults because they are more likely to air dry or spend more time close to shore where the parasite tends to be.



What are the symptoms?

- ▶ The first time a person swims in contaminated water, they may not get swimmer's itch. If you've had swimmer's itch before, you may be more likely to have this allergic reaction again with more intense and immediate symptoms.
- ▶ Symptoms can begin within minutes of getting out of the water or they can take a few days to develop. Symptoms of swimmer's itch may include:
 - ▶ Tingling, burning, or itching of the skin.
 - ▶ Small, itchy, red pimples on the skin that look like bug bites.
 - ▶ Small blisters.
- ▶ The small reddish pimples typically appear within 12 hours and reach their largest size after about 24 hours. These welts may turn into small blisters. The itching may continue for several days but usually goes away within a week. Do not scratch because it can cause an infection.
- ▶ Swimmer's itch can appear on any part of the body that was in the water.





What are the treatment options?

- ▶ Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require going to the doctor or treatment.
- ▶ For relief, apply skin lotions or anti-itch creams to the affected area or take an over-the-counter antihistamine.
- ▶ Contact a doctor if the rash covers a large portion of your body, is preventing you from sleeping, or is causing secondary infections.



How can it be prevented?

The more time you spend in the water, the greater your chances of getting swimmer's itch. To reduce your chances of getting swimmer's itch:

- ▶ Dry off with a towel immediately after leaving the water instead of air drying. This helps prevent any parasites from burrowing into the skin.
- ▶ Change out of wet swimsuits and shower as soon as possible after swimming.
- ▶ Use water-repellant substances, such as waterproof sunscreen, to make it harder for the parasite to get into the skin. This is not completely effective, but can help.
- ▶ Look for signs that swimmer's itch activity is high. If present, find another place to swim. Do not swim in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem.
- ▶ Do not feed wildlife and waterfowl, like ducks or geese, near swimming areas. Feeding encourages them to stay in the area and increases the risk of the water becoming infected with the parasite.

