

Fact Sheet: Swimmer's Itch

What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch is caused by an allergic reaction to parasites found in some birds and mammals. Humans can be exposed to the parasites when working, wading or swimming in lakes and streams. The parasites are released into fresh and salt water from infected snails. Rather than finding a host bird or animal the parasite burrows into the skin of a nearby swimmer's skin causing an allergic reaction and rash.

What are the symptoms?

- Tingling, burning or itching of the skin.
- Small red spots on the skin which begin to itch within 12 hours of exposure.
- Severity of the rash can vary from person to person.
- Itching may last up to a week or more.
- Symptoms are caused by an allergic reaction, so the more often you swim or wade in contaminated water, the more severe the symptoms get.

How is it spread?

- Swimmer's itch is spread by direct contact with water that is contaminated with the parasites.
- **It cannot be spread from person to person.**

How is it treated?

- If you find yourself itching after swimming:
- Get out and towel-off briskly; this helps to remove the tiny larvae that cause the itch.
 - Shower as soon as possible after a swim.
 - Treatment is supportive only, with over the counter anti-itching ointments or lotions.
 - Cool compress to the affected areas.
 - Soak in oatmeal bath.
 - Try not to scratch because this may cause the rash to become infected.
 - If itching becomes prolonged, see your doctor for additional treatment.

How is it prevented?

- Avoid still pools of non-chlorinated water during the mid-summer and fall months, especially on warm days.
- Avoid swimming in water which has a high number of ducks, geese, shore birds or snails.

Do not feed ducks and geese. Feeding ducks and geese bring them close to shore where they can spread the disease.

This fact sheet is for information only and is not meant to be used for self -diagnosis or as a substitute for consultation with a health care provider. For more information call your health care provider or call Washtenaw County Public Health at 734-544-6700.

