

SWIMMER'S ITCH (CERCARIAL OR SCHISTOSOMAL DERMATITIS)

What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch is an allergic reaction to a small parasite called a blood fluke. These tiny parasites are released from infected snails into fresh and salt water such as lakes, ponds, and ocean bays. Normally, the blood flukes infect a bird or mammal by burrowing into these animals' skin. Sometimes the blood flukes may burrow into the skin of people wading, playing, or swimming in infested shallow waters. After entering the skin of people, the flukes die, causing an allergic reaction that results in intense itching, a rash, and sometimes small blisters.

How does water become infested with the parasite?

The adult blood flukes live in the blood of infected animals such as ducks, gulls, muskrats, and beavers. These adult blood flukes mate and produce eggs that are passed into the water in the solid waste of infected birds or mammals. In the water, the eggs hatch into free-swimming larvae. These larvae first infect a certain kind of snail and develop further. Then they are released again into the water, where they infect a bird or mammal, thus completing the cycle.

What are symptoms of swimmer's itch?

If the fluke larvae burrow into a person's skin, allergic reaction symptoms can develop in minutes to days after being in contaminated water. These symptoms include burning or itching of the skin. A rash with small reddish pimples may appear within 12 hours. The pimples might develop into small blisters. Itching may last up to a week or more. The rash should not be scratched since scratching may lead to bacterial infections. More serious symptoms may occur after spending longer amounts of time in fluke larvae-infested water. Similar symptoms may be caused by other items in the water such as algae or from the bites of certain insects. However, these non-swimmer's itch reactions tend to go away quickly.

Do I need to see a doctor for treatment?

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not need medical attention. Typical remedies for an itching rash, such as a cool compress, corticosteroid cream, an Epsom salts bath, a baking soda paste, or an anti-itch lotion, may be used. If itching is severe, see your doctor.

Who can get swimmer's itch?

Anyone who swims in water where blood fluke larvae are found can get swimmer's itch. Larvae are more likely to be present in shallow water near the shoreline. Children are often infected because they tend to play in the shallow water. Children are also less likely to towel dry themselves after leaving the water. Swimmer's itch cannot be spread to other parts of the body or from one person to another.

What can be done to avoid getting swimmer's itch?

- Do not swim or play in water where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs are posted warning of unsafe water.
- Do not swim or play in water where there are a large number of ducks or gulls, or areas infested with aquatic weeds and snails.
- Swim or play in the water for shorter periods of time (e.g., 10 minutes or less).
- Dry off as soon as possible after leaving the water by thoroughly rubbing the skin with a dry towel. This may remove the burrowing fluke larvae.
- Do not attract birds (e.g., by feeding them) to areas where people swim.
- Encourage public health or environmental health officials to post warning signs where swimmer's itch is a current problem.

Where can I find more information on swimmer's Itch?

[U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention swimmer's itch webpage:](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/swimmersitch/index.html)
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