

Cercarial Dermatitis / Schistosome Dermatitis

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What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to infection with certain parasites of birds and mammals. These microscopic parasites are released from infected snails to swim in fresh and salt water, such as lakes, ponds, and oceans used for swimming and wading. Swimming in a swimming pool is safe as long as it is well maintained and chlorinated.

Who gets Swimmer's Itch?

People who swim or wade in infested water may experience this itching rash. All age groups and both sexes can be involved, but children are most often infected due to their habits of swimming and wading in water and playing on the beach as the water evaporates from the skin.

What are the symptoms of Swimmer's Itch?

Within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water, tingling, burning, or itching of the skin can begin. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours. Pimples may develop into small blisters. Itching may last for a week, but will eventually go away.

How is Swimmer's Itch spread?

The infection occurs by swimming or wading in infested water and then allowing the water to evaporate off the skin rather than regularly drying the skin with a towel. Person to person spread does not occur.

How soon do symptoms appear?

Symptoms can appear within minutes to days after swimming or wading in contaminated water. The greater the number of exposures to contaminated water, the more intense and immediate the symptoms of swimmer's itch will be.

Is a person with Swimmer's Itch contagious?

No, swimmer's itch is not spread person to person.

How is Swimmer's Itch treated?

Treatment is usually not needed for swimmer's itch. If a rash is present, the following may be used for relief:

- Over the counter steroid creams
- Cool compresses
- Baking soda or aveeno baths
- Anti-itch lotion such as Caladryl

Should a person with Swimmer's Itch be excluded from work or school?

No, it is not necessary to exclude a person with swimmer's itch from work or school.

Can Swimmer's Itch be prevented?

The best ways to prevent swimmers itch are the following:

- Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water.
- Avoid swimming or wading in marshy areas where snails are commonly found
- Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water
- Do not attract birds by feeding them in areas where people are swimming.

Want more information?

Information about swimmer's itch and other related health topics can be found at the website www.cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please call 202-442-5842.

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