

What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by a parasite (shistosomes) that infects birds, semi-aquatic mammals, snails and people. Parasites are released from infected snails into the water. Once released, the parasites can penetrate the skin of swimmers or people playing in the water, where they remain until they die. The parasites may cause an allergic reaction in some people. When people become infected with the parasite, the parasite does not mature, reproduce or cause any permanent infection.

Who is at risk for swimmer's itch?

Only about one-third of people who come in contact with the parasite develop swimmer's itch. People who swim or wade in water where birds are known to gather may experience this itching rash. The parasite tends to prefer shallow waters.

All age groups are at risk, but children are most often infected due to their habits of swimming or wading in shallow water and allowing the water to evaporate from the skin instead of towel drying off.

What are the symptoms of swimmer's itch?

As the parasite-contaminated water is allowed to evaporate off the skin, a tingling sensation may be felt as the parasite digs into the skin. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours. Pimples may develop into small blisters. Scratching the areas may result in secondary bacterial infections. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away.

How soon do symptoms appear?

A person's first exposure to infested water may not result in the itchy rash. Repeated exposure increases a person's allergic sensitivity to the parasite and increases the likelihood of rash development. Symptoms may appear within one to two hours of exposure.

How is swimmer's itch spread?

An individual may get the infection by swimming or wading in water contaminated with the parasite and then allowing water to evaporate off the skin rather than regularly drying the skin with a towel. Person-to-person spread does not occur.

When and for how long is a person able to spread the disease?

Swimmer's itch is not spread from person to person.

How is a person diagnosed?

Laboratory tests are available to diagnose swimmer's itch.

What is the treatment?

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require medical attention. If you have a rash, you may try the following for relief: creams, compresses, anti-itch lotions or baking soda pastes. Though difficult, try not to scratch. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected. If itching is severe, your health-care provider may suggest prescription-strength lotions or creams to lessen your symptoms.

Does past infection make a person immune?

No. Re-infection can occur.

Should children or others be excluded from day care, school, work or other activities if they have swimmer's itch?

No. Infants, toddlers and school-aged children should not be excluded unless the staff determines the child is unwilling or unable to participate in activities. They should also be excluded if the staff determines that they cannot care for the child without compromising their ability to care for the health and safety of the other children in the group.

All others can attend work and other functions as long as they are well enough to do so.

What can be done to prevent the spread of swimmer's itch?

- Towel off immediately after swimming or wading in infested water to help in preventing rash development.
- Swim in water away from the shore.
- Avoid swimming in areas where snails have accumulated.
- Don't encourage birds to stay near swimming areas by feeding them.

Additional Information:

Additional information is available by calling the North Dakota Department of Health at 800.472.2180.

Resources:

1. American Academy of Pediatrics. [Children in Out-Of-Home Care]. In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2015: 132-151.
2. American Academy of Pediatrics. [Schistosomiasis]. In: Kimberlin DW, Brady MT, Jackson MA, Long SS, eds. *Red Book: 2015 Report of the Committee on Infectious Diseases*. 30th ed. Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics; 2015: 704-706.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2012). Parasites - Cercarial Dermatitis (also known as Swimmer's Itch). www.cdc.gov/parasites/swimmersitch/faqs.html