

Swimmer's itch (Cercarial dermatitis)

What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch is a rash caused by microscopic parasites called cercariae carried by aquatic birds, marine mammals and snails. This parasite is released from snails into shallow waters around lakes and ponds.

How do I contract swimmer's itch?

Swimmers may become infected by swimming or wading in infested water. Swimmers are more likely to contract swimmer's itch if water is allowed to evaporate off the skin rather than regularly drying the skin with a towel. Person-to-person spread does not occur.

What are the symptoms of swimmer's itch?

Symptoms of swimmer's itch can be felt soon after swimming. You will first feel a tingling, itching or burning sensation.

Within twelve hours of swimming, red bumps appear on the skin which may turn into blisters or a larger rash. The greater number of exposures to contaminated water, the more intense and immediate symptoms of swimmer's itch will be. The itch is not contagious and cannot be spread from person-to-person.

Scratching affected areas can result in secondary bacterial infections if the skin is broken. Swimmer's itch typically lasts for 2-5 days, but the symptoms including rash may be present for up to two weeks. You should consult a physician if symptoms persist for more than a week.

How do I treat swimmer's itch?

If you are affected with swimmer's itch, itching treatments such as a cold compress, anti-itch medications, antihistamines, and taking a bath in Epsom salts, baking soda or colloidal oatmeal are all effective treatments. You may seek medical attention, but it is not necessary.

If scratching is too difficult to avoid, your physician may provide a prescription strength lotion or cream.

How do I prevent swimmer's itch?

Avoid shallow waters with many aquatic plants when there is a swimmer's itch outbreak. Swimming rather than playing or wading in shallow water will reduce exposure. Towelling off very briskly right after leaving the water will help prevent the spread of swimmer's itch. Showering right after leaving water may help prevent swimmer's itch as well.

To prevent the spread of the parasite, refrain from feeding birds along the beach.

The link below provides the contact information for public health officers throughout the province:

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/public-health/public-health-inspectors>