

# HUMAN PARASITES:

What everyone should know.

## SWIMMER'S ITCH



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### **Swimmer's itch**

Swimmer's itch is an itchy rash that can occur after you go swimming or wading outdoors. Also known as cercarial dermatitis, swimmer's itch is most common in freshwater lakes and ponds, but it occasionally occurs in salt water.

Swimmer's itch is a rash usually caused by an allergic reaction to parasites that burrow into your skin while you're swimming or wading in warm water.

The parasites that cause swimmer's itch normally live in waterfowl and some animals. These parasites can be released into the water. Humans aren't suitable hosts, so the parasites soon die while still in your skin.

Swimmer's itch is uncomfortable, but it usually clears up on its own in a few days. In the meantime, you can control itching with over-the-counter or prescription medications.

### **Symptoms**

The itchy rash associated with swimmer's itch looks like reddish pimples or blisters. It may appear within minutes or days after swimming or wading in infested water.

Swimmer's itch usually affects only exposed skin — skin not covered by swimsuits, wet suits or waders. Signs and symptoms of swimmer's itch typically worsen with each exposure to the parasites.

### **When to see a doctor**

Talk to your doctor if you have a rash after swimming that lasts more than three days. If you notice pus at the rash site, consult your doctor. You might be referred to a doctor who specializes in skin conditions (dermatologist).

### **Causes**

The parasites that cause swimmer's itch live in the blood of waterfowl and in animals that live near ponds and lakes. Examples include:

- Geese
- Ducks
- Gulls
- Beavers
- Muskrats

The parasite's eggs enter the water via their hosts' feces. Before infecting birds, animals or people, the hatched parasites must live for a time within a type of snail. These snails live near the shoreline, which explains why infections occur most often in shallow water.

Swimmer's itch isn't contagious from person to person, so you don't need to worry about catching swimmer's itch from someone who has this itchy rash.

### **Risk factors**

The parasites that cause swimmer's itch live in the blood of waterfowl and in animals that live near ponds and lakes. The more time you spend in infested water, the higher your risk of

swimmer's itch. Children may have the highest risk, since they tend to play in shallow water and are less likely to dry off with a towel.

Some people are more sensitive to swimmer's itch than others are. And, your sensitivity can increase each time you're exposed to the parasites that cause swimmer's itch.

### **Complications**

Swimmer's itch rarely leads to complications, but your skin can become infected if you scratch too vigorously. Try to avoid scratching the rash.

Self-management

### **Lifestyle and home remedies**

These tips might help reduce the itch:

- Apply a cream or medication.
- Don't scratch.
- Cover affected areas with a clean, wet washcloth.
- Soak in a bath sprinkled with Epsom salts, baking soda or oatmeal.
- Make a paste of baking soda and water, and then apply it to the affected areas.

### **Prevention**

The parasites that cause swimmer's itch live in the blood of waterfowl and in animals that live near ponds and lakes. To reduce the risk of swimmer's itch:

- **Choose swimming spots carefully.** Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or signs warn of possible contamination. Also avoid swimming or wading in marshy areas where snails are commonly found.
- **Avoid the shoreline, if possible.** If you're a strong swimmer, head to deeper water for your swim. You may be more likely to develop swimmer's itch if you spend a lot of time in warmer water near the shore.
- **Rinse after swimming.** Rinse exposed skin with clean water immediately after leaving the water, then vigorously dry your skin with a towel. Launder your swimsuits often.
- **Skip the bread crumbs.** Don't feed birds on docks or near swimming areas.

- **Apply waterproof sunscreen.** This has been reported to protect the skin from the parasite that causes swimmer's itch.

