
Swimmer's Itch



Each summer, a condition commonly called "Swimmer's Itch" is reported frequently among bathers in many of the lakes found throughout Washington State, particularly in the western and northern regions.

Swimmer's Itch (*Schistosoma cercarial dermatitis*) occurs when a certain small, free-swimming parasite burrows under the skin of a swimmer. The parasite then dies and an allergic type of reaction develops, which causes intense itching and the appearance of a rash.

During recent years, Swimmer's Itch has been reported in many lakes in the state, including some in the following counties: Thurston, Pierce, King, Grays Harbor, Kitsap, Skagit, Whatcom, San Juan, Island, Grant, Okanogan and Chelan.

Symptoms

Within five minutes to an hour after leaving the water, the infected person may experience a sharp burning and itching of the skin affected, possibly occurring on any part of the body exposed. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours and these may be surrounded by redness. On the second day, some of these pimples may become small blisters and in some cases the blisters may become pustules.

The itching is intense and causes considerable scratching. This may be controlled to some extent by the application of phenolized calamine lotion and the administration of an anti-histaminic, such as benadryl or parabenzamine. For further advice on treatment, please consult your physician.

After a week or so, the itching subsides and the lesions heal, although in some instances as long as 30 days are required to recover completely.



Life Cycle of the Swimmer's Itch Parasite

The adult parasite exists in water fowl, such as ducks and gulls, and in certain aquatic animals such as beaver and muskrat. The eggs produced by the adult parasite develop in the intestinal tract of its host and are excreted into the water by the bird or animal. The eggs hatch into small "wrigglers", which swim in search of the second host - a particular species of aquatic snail.

If the wiggler finds the proper species of snail, it penetrates the skin and develops into the mature adult parasite.



While man is not a natural host, humans become involved accidentally. When a swimmer leaves the water, a certain amount of water remains on the skin. As this water evaporates or runs off, wrigglers that are present quickly burrow into the skin. Because the human skin and tissue is not a suitable development environment for these parasites, the wrigglers die. The presence of this foreign protein material under the skin sets up an allergic type of reaction, resulting in the rash and itching.

Prevention

Simply removing the water from the body immediately after emergence from the water is a successful way of preventing the occurrence of Swimmer's Itch. The lake water can be removed by showering, toweling, or by wiping the water off with the palms of the hands.



In addition, some swimmers have had moderate success in preventing Swimmer's Itch by applying a *good* waterproof sunscreen prior to entering the water. (Many sunscreens that claim to be waterproof offer little protection. The best choice would be waterproof sunscreen made for diving and other heavy duty uses.)

Many lakes in the Northwest that are infested with the parasite have been used successfully as popular swimming areas because these precautions have been taken by swimmers.

For further information, contact the Thurston County Public Health and Social Services Department, Environmental Health Division at (360) 754-4111.

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