

SWIMMERS ITCH



What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch, or *Schistosoma Dermatitidis*, is a rash that develops after swimming in contaminated water. It is an allergic reaction to microscopic parasites from infected birds and mammals.

The parasite larvae spread when birds pass eggs in their droppings into the water. The eggs hatch into tiny free-swimming larvae (Cercariae). Cercariae are minute, fork-tailed colourless animals, barely visible to the naked eye. In humans, the parasites can't mature or reproduce so they die under the skin. This results in an allergic reaction causing itchiness and a rash with red circular blotches. It does not cause any permanent infections.

Swimmer's itch commonly starts in the early summer when people begin to wade in water, but can occur at any time during the summer season.

PUBLIC HEALTH

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York Region



Who gets swimmer's itch?

Anyone who swims or wades in infested water can get this itchy rash. Children are most often infected because they tend to swim or wade in shallow water and play on the beach.

Swimmer's itch cannot spread from person to person.

Symptoms

Symptoms can appear within minutes or days and can include:

- Tingling skin
- Burning skin
- Itchy skin
- Small reddish pimples
- Small blisters

When infested water evaporates off the skin, an initial tingling sensation may be felt as parasites penetrate the skin.

Symptoms may appear within one to two hours of exposure, but a person's first exposure to infested water may not result in the itchy rash. Repeated exposure can increase a person's allergic sensitivity to the parasite and increase the likelihood of developing a rash.

Itching may continue for several days, but symptoms should disappear within a week. The itching is caused by our body's defence system, as it gets rid of the parasite.

Treatment

No treatment is required, although you may get some relief by treating the itch (e.g. calamine lotion, baking soda bath and antihistamines).

Swimmer's itch does not require medical attention unless it becomes infected. The most important thing you can do is avoid scratching. It is time limited!

Prevention

- Avoid bathing or swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where you see many fresh water snails.
- Avoid swimming or wading in shallow water and marshy areas.
- Rub down briskly with a coarse towel immediately after coming out of the water—Cercariae larvae do not penetrate the skin until the water evaporates.
- Do not attract birds, by feeding them, to areas where people swim.

A Public Health Inspector is available to answer questions Monday to Friday 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. toll-free at York Region Health Connection **1-800-361-5653** or TTY **1-866-252-6228** or after hours at **1-888-335-0111**.

York Region Community and Health Services is mandated to promote safe water practices. This fact sheet is part of a series to provide information and standards on this topic.