FACT SHEET: SWIMMER'S ITCH

May 2025

WHAT IS SWIMMER'S ITCH?

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to infection with the parasitic, larval form of the flatworm. These microscopic parasites are released from infected snails into fresh and salt water, such as lakes, ponds, and oceans, and may burrow into the skin of swimmers. There is no risk of swimmer's itch from swimming pools as long as they are well maintained and chlorinated.

WHO CAN GET SWIMMER'S ITCH?

Anyone who swims or wades in infected water could be at risk. However, children are most often infected because they are more likely to swim or play in infected waters and less likely to towel dry their skin.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS OF SWIMMER'S ITCH?

Symptoms of swimmer's itch include tingling, burning, or itching of the skin. Small reddish pimples may appear and develop into small blisters. Itching may last for a week but will eventually go away.

HOW DOES SWIMMER'S ITCH SPREAD?

Parasite eggs enter the water through the waste of infected mammals and birds. The eggs are ingested by snails where they go through stages of development before being released back into the water in larval form. Infection occurs when people swim or wade in the infested water and then allow the water to evaporate off the skin instead of drying the skin with a towel. Person to person spread does not occur.

HOW SOON DO SYMPTOMS APPEAR?

Symptoms can appear within minutes to days after swimming or wading in contaminated water. The greater the number of exposures to contaminated water, the more intense and immediate the symptoms of swimmer's itch will be.

IS A PERSON WITH SWIMMER'S ITCH CONTAGIOUS?

No, swimmer's itch is not spread from person to person.

HOW IS SWIMMER'S ITCH TREATED?

Treatment is usually not needed for swimmer's itch. If a rash is present, the following may be used for relief:

- Over the counter steroid creams
- Cool compresses
- Baths with Epsom salt, baking soda, or oatmeal
- Anti-itch lotions and creams

SHOULD A PERSON WITH SWIMMER'S ITCH BE EXCUDED FROM WORK OR SCHOOL?

No, it is not necessary to exclude a person with swimmer's itch from work or school.

HOW CAN SWIMMER'S ITCH BE PREVENTED?

The best ways to prevent swimmer's itch are to:

- Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water.
- Avoid swimming or wading in marshy areas where snails are commonly found.
- Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water.
- Do not attract birds by feeding them in areas where people are swimming.

WANT MORE INFORMATION?

Information about swimmer's itch and other related health topics can be found at cdc.gov. The DC Department of Health promotes the health and safety of the District residents. For additional information, please visit dchealth.dc.gov or call (202) 442-5865.

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