Is the Rash Dangerous?

The allergic reaction to swimmer's itch can be extremely annoying, but it is not dangerous. No other parts of the body, other than the skin, are affected. Each lesion is discrete and will not spread. The skin rash usually lasts four to five days, although it can persist for up to two weeks.

What Can I Do If A Rash Does Appear?

If you do contract swimmer's itch, anti-itch medications (lotions and some antihistamines) will help the symptoms.

A family physician or pharmacist can recommend the best treatment.

How to Report Swimmer's Itch Cases

If you know of a confirmed case of swimmer's itch, please report the date and location of the outbreak to:

Swimmer's Itch Co-ordinator
Water Quality Management Section
Manitoba Conservation
123 Main Street
Suite 160, Winnipeg, MB R3C 1A5
Phone: (204) 945-7036
Toll Free: 1-800-282-8069 (ext. 7036)
Fax: (204) 948-2357

If you wish to obtain additional information on swimmer's itch, please contact the above number.

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Swimmer's Itch

Water Quality Series 1

Protecting & Managing our Future

Manitoba
Building for the Future

Swimmer's Itch:
Problems & Solutions

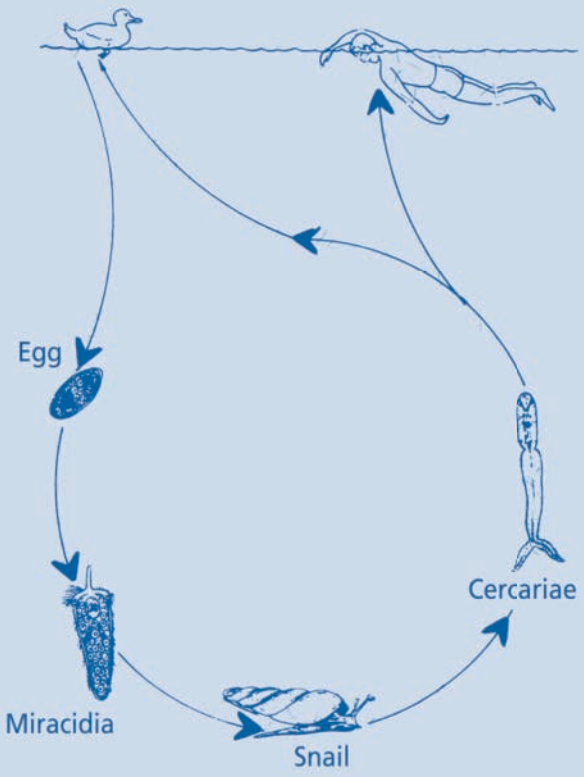
What is Swimmer's Itch?

"Swimmer's Itch or "water rash" is the name given to a temporary skin irritation acquired by swimmers.

Life Cycle

The swimmer's itch worm is a parasite carried by waterfowl and water mammals. The adult worms lay eggs in the intestines of these "hosts", and the eggs are passed into the water with the animal feces. While in the water, these eggs hatch into microscopic miracidia. In order to survive, the miracidia must enter the tissue of a snail. While inside, the miracidia develop into cercariae.

Lifecycle of a Swimmer's Itch Organism



The cercariae now emerge from the snail host. The cercariae which are less than 2 mm in length, are now in search for a suitable bird or aquatic animal to complete their life cycle.

People are Unsuitable Hosts

Swimmer's itch in people is caused when cercariae enters a person's skin rather than their natural hosts. Since people are unsuitable hosts, the cercariae quickly die.

When does Swimmer's Itch Occur?

Swimmer's itch occurs during the summer, as hot weather speeds up the development of cercariae. The first case of swimmer's itch is usually reported in June.

Swimmer's Itch Symptoms

- **Tingling sensations**
  Shortly after emerging from the water, swimmers will notice a tingling sensation on exposed parts of the body.
- **Red spots**
  Swimmers will next notice small red spots where the organism has penetrated the skin.
- **Itching**
  Hours later, the tingling sensation will disappear, and the red spots will enlarge and become itchy. The degree of discomfort varies with the sensitivity of the individual, the severity of the infestation and prior exposure.

Preventative Measures

- **Avoid swimmer's itch beaches**
  The best preventative measure is to avoid swimming in lakes known to have swimmer's itch. Look for swimmer's itch advisory signs posted on beaches.
- **Towelling down**
  If you choose to swim in waters that have swimmer's itch, or if you are unsure whether swimmer's itch is present, towelling down briskly may help remove the parasite.
- **Showering**
  A shower taken immediately after leaving the water may also be effective.
- **Avoid areas with aquatic plants**
  Higher densities of the swimmer's itch organism may be found in shallow areas of a lake which have aquatic plants. This is because these areas are ideal habitat for snails. In addition, wind action may concentrate the swimmer's itch organisms near shore.
- **Use a fragrant suntan oil:**
  Although not scientifically substantiated, some individuals believe that use of fragrant suntan oil on your body may reduce your risk of getting swimmer's itch.
- **Chemical control**
  The use of chemicals to control swimmer's itch is not always practical, successful or legal. Chemical treatment to kill the snail host which carries the swimmer's itch parasite, has sometimes been used. However, chemical treatment can kill or impair the growth of other organisms in the water, resulting in ecological damage.