

Factsheet

Swimmer's itch.

This factsheet provides advice to users of freshwater recreational lakes on how to minimise the risk of experiencing swimmers itch.

Last updated: 23 November 2012

Introduction

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to parasite larvae that infect some birds and mammals. The microscopic parasite larvae are released from infected snails into fresh lake ecosystems.

Although swimmer's itch may not be a problem in freshwater lakes every summer, the condition often occurs in people who swim or wade in lakes during the first round of warm weather in early summer. The parasite larvae cannot live out of water, and they die immediately after contacting the skin. The skin's reaction is not due to an infection created by the parasite, but is due to an inflammatory reaction.

The presence of swimmer's itch does not indicate that a lake is polluted. The snails and birds that carry the parasite are part of the diverse natural environment of the lake however in early summer sometimes the conditions of freshwater lakes are particularly favourable to these itch-generating parasites.

Symptoms from exposure

Symptoms include itchy, raised red spots, that form when the larvae enters the surface layer of the skin. The inflammation commonly occurs within 30 minutes to several hours following exposure. While the small red spots do not generally last more than a week, they will continue to increase in size during the first 24-30 hours after exposure. Children can develop a more serious case of swimmer's itch if they swim more regularly and play near the water's edge where the larvae may be more concentrated.

What to do to prevent getting swimmer's itch

- Avoid swimming for long periods in shallow water.
- Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem and especially when there is wind blowing toward the shore.
- Water-resistant topical applications of the common insect repellent DEET may prevent swimmer's itch.
- Shower and/or towel off briskly after swimming.

What to do if you get swimmer's itch

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require medical attention. If you have a rash, you may try the following for relief:

- Use corticosteroid cream.
- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas.
- Bathe in epsom salts or baking soda.
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash (made by stirring water into baking soda until it reaches a paste-like consistency).
- Use an anti-itch lotion.

Though difficult, try not to scratch. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected. If itching is severe, your doctor may suggest prescription-strength lotions or creams to lessen your symptoms.

Can swimmer's itch be spread from person-to-person?

Swimmer's itch cannot be spread from one person to another.

Further Information

The following link to the US Centre for Disease Control and Prevention provides more detailed information on swimmer's itch <http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/swimmersitch/>

Contacts

Nepean Blue Mountains Public Health Unit, Penrith Office (02) 4734 2022

Western Sydney Public Health Unit, Parramatta Office (02) 9840 3603