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Disease Spotlight: SWIMMER'S ITCH



What is swimmer's itch?

Swimmer's itch (AKA **cercarial dermatitis**) is a skin reaction that some people have to the entry of a larval stage of certain **flatworms** into the epidermal layer of the skin. After the parasite enters, it dies and may cause dermatitis in individuals who have been previously sensitized.

What are the symptoms of swimmer's itch?

Within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water, you may **experience tingling, burning, or itching** of the skin. **Small reddish pimples** appear within twelve hours. Pimples may develop into small blisters (**papules**). Scratching the areas may result in secondary bacterial infections. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away.

When and where does swimmer's itch occur?

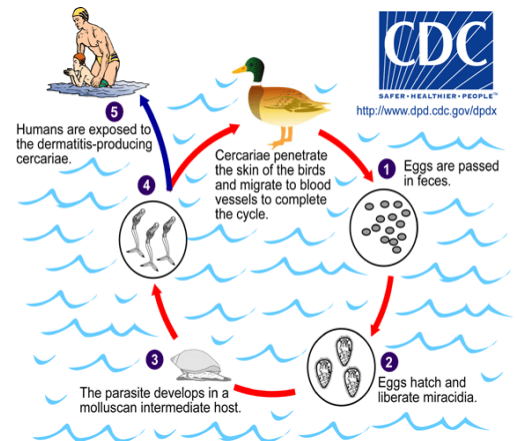
Swimmer's itch is found **worldwide**, and can occur in any **salty or fresh body of water** carrying the infectious parasite. Outbreaks are more common in the **summer months**.

How does the water become infected with the parasite?

The adult parasite lives in the blood of infected mammals and birds, and the parasites produce eggs that are passed in the feces of the infected animals.

If the eggs land in or are washed into the water, the eggs hatch, releasing small, free-swimming larvae. These larvae swim in the water in search of a certain species of **aquatic snail**.

If the larvae find one of these snails, they infect the snail, multiply and undergo further development. Infected snails release a different type of larvae into the water. This larval form then swims until coming in contact with a suitable host.



How is swimmer's itch treated?

Because the larvae cannot develop inside a human, the disease is **self limiting**, and will disappear within a week or 2. Medical attention is normally not necessary, and it cannot be spread from person to person. A **corticosteroid cream, calamine lotion, oatmeal bath, or cool compresses** can be effective in reducing itching and swelling.

What can be done to reduce the risk of swimmer's itch?

- Do not swim in areas where swimmer's itch has been known to be a problem.
- Do not swim or wade in **marshy areas** where snails are commonly found.
- **Towel dry** or **shower** immediately after leaving the water.
- Do not feed or **attract birds** to areas where people are swimming.

Source:

For more information on swimmer's itch, visit <http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/index.htm> or <http://www.hope.edu/swimmersitch/faq.html>