

Healthy Beaches: Protect Yourself from Swimmer's Itch (Cercarial Dermatitis)

What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's Itch is a skin rash caused by parasitic flatworms, (schistosomes) found in lakes and ponds across Canada. These parasites usually infect birds or animals, not people, and only cause temporary skin irritation.

How do people get Swimmer's Itch?

You can get Swimmer's Itch by swimming or wading in water where the parasites are present. These parasites come from bird droppings, grow inside snails, and are released into the water when the snails let them out as part of their life cycle. If the parasites come into contact with your skin, they can cause an itchy rash.

Swimmer's Itch is not contagious. The parasites cannot survive in people, and the rash doesn't spread from person to person.



What are the symptoms of Swimmer's Itch?

Symptoms can include:

- tingling, burning, or itching of the skin,
- small reddish pimples; and
- small blisters.

Symptoms of Swimmer's Itch can appear within minutes to a few days after contact with contaminated water. It is an allergic reaction, and repeated exposure can lead to more intense symptoms as the body becomes increasingly sensitive.

Itching usually lasts about a week, though some symptoms may continue for up to two. Avoid scratching to prevent infection. If symptoms persist, seek medical attention.

How do I treat Swimmer's Itch?

If you are affected by Swimmer's Itch, effective treatments include anti-itch medications, antihistamines, cold compresses, and baths with Epsom salts, baking soda, or colloidal oatmeal.

Medical attention is usually not required, but you may seek it if needed. If persistent scratching becomes a concern, a physician can recommend a stronger lotion or cream for relief.

How do I prevent Swimmer's Itch?

- Stay out of shallow waters with lots of plants, as they may have parasites.
- Swim instead of playing or wading in shallow water to lower the risk.
- Dry off quickly with a towel right after leaving the water to prevent a rash.
- Take a cleansing shower right after swimming to minimize the risk.
- Avoid feeding birds at the beach to help prevent the spread of parasites.

Routine lab testing is not conducted for Swimmer's Itch. Instead, it is typically identified through public reports and concerns. Watch for signs at public beaches warning about Swimmer's Itch and avoid those areas to stay safe.

Visit the Healthy Beaches Program website at the following link: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/environment-public-health-and-safety/environmental-health/healthy-beach-program>

For more information, contact your local public health inspection office. A list of offices can be found here:

<https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/public-health/public-health-inspectors>