

Swimmer's Itch



Public Health Division
Environmental Public Health Services

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Capital Health
EDMONTON AREA

WHAT IS SWIMMER'S ITCH

Swimmer's itch is a skin reaction (dermatitis) to small parasites in the water when they try to enter the skin.

The parasite is called a "Schistosome" and is found in lakes throughout Alberta particularly during warm weather.

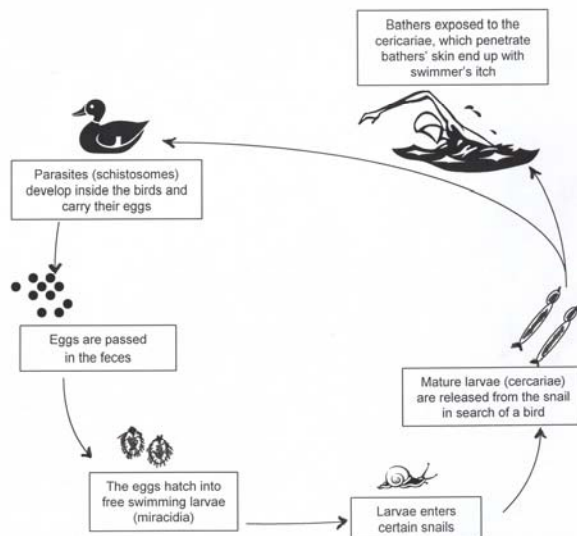
If you are exposed to these parasites, the symptoms will vary depending on your particular sensitivity. A reaction usually occurs 10 to 30 minutes after exposure. It starts with itching and irritation of skin but lasts only 2 to 3 days. In 5 to 14 days, a second reaction occurs; small raised areas called papules appear along with itching. With a second exposure, the symptoms may be more intense.

HOW DO YOU GET SWIMMER'S ITCH?

In the summer, the parasites or Schistosomes, live their life cycle in fresh water. They rely on birds, usually ducks and geese and snails to complete their life cycle. Birds carry the eggs of the parasite in their feces and urine and deposit these eggs in the lakes.

Once in the water, the eggs hatch into free swimming larvae (miracidia) which are very small and enter any snails in the water. The mature larvae (cercariae) are then released from the snail and swim in search of a bird to continue their cycle. By mistake, the larvae may try to penetrate the skin of a swimmer. Since people are not the normal host, the larvae remain in the skin and die.

Children often get swimmer's itch when wading and playing in shallow and weedy water, since snails and free-floating parasites are usually found in calm, warm water.



HOW DO YOU TREAT SWIMMER'S ITCH?

If symptoms appear, contact your family doctor for treatment to relieve the itching.

HOW CAN YOU PREVENT SWIMMER'S ITCH?

Lakes are not sampled for this parasite. The risk of swimmers itch changes from day to day so samples cannot predict the safety of the water.

To prevent or reduce swimmer's itch:

- Avoid swimming for long periods of time in shallow water.
- Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a problem.
- Briskly rub the skin with a towel immediately after leaving the water.
- Do not attract birds by feeding them in areas where people are swimming

When cases of swimmer's itch are reported at a particular lake, the local park or health authorities may post sign warning swimmers of the potential risk.

