

Swimmer's Itch

Swimmer's itch (also called "clam-digger's itch", "duck itch") is a temporary, itchy rash (allergic immune reaction) caused by small worm-like parasites called schistosomes. This is distinct from the parasitic flatworms of *Schistosoma* that cause a group of chronic infections called schistosomiasis, known also as bilharziasis. These schistosomes spend their life cycle as parasites in the bodies of water snails and in the blood stream of aquatic mammals, ducks or other waterfowl. During their life cycle, schistosome larvae leave their snail host and swim near the surface of the water, looking for bird and mammal hosts.

Symptoms can range from a mild irritation to a very severe, itchy red rash. Scratching can cause severe pain and swelling, or cause your skin to become infected. The severity of your symptoms will depend on how many larvae get on to your skin, and how sensitive you are to them. Symptoms tend to be worse after repeat exposure.

As you start to dry off and the larvae start to burrow into your skin, you may feel a tingling sensation. Small, pin sized red spots will appear, which grow into larger red rashes within several hours. As these red spots grow, the tingling feeling becomes a strong itch.

A rash may appear within 12 hours after infection. The reaction may last from 2 to 5 days and symptoms can last as long as 2 weeks. Repeat infections are usually worse. People become more sensitive to the larvae and develop stronger responses each time.

HOW CAN I GET SWIMMER'S ITCH?

Sometimes larvae might get on your skin if you are swimming or wading in water. The larvae burrow under your skin, but, they cannot survive in humans and will die almost immediately. It is the reaction to these tiny larvae under the skin that causes swimmer's itch.

Swimmer's itch does not spread from person to person.

WHERE ARE THESE PARASITES FOUND?

These parasites are found in many lakes, ponds and coastal waters in British Columbia usually in the warm summer months. The tiny larvae are more likely to be found floating near the surface and edges of lakes and other bodies of water.

Although not very common, cases of swimmer's itch have also been reported on coastal beaches in B.C.

WHO HAS A HIGHER RISK OF GETTING IT

Young children who wade and splash in shallow areas of lakes and ponds may be at higher risk because:

- + They are constantly getting wet, without thoroughly drying off.
- + They usually play by the shore where these parasites tend to be.
- + Younger children's skin can be more sensitive than the skin of an adult.

HOW CAN I AVOID SWIMMER'S ITCH?

There is no sure way to avoid swimmer's itch entirely, unless you avoid lakes, ponds or beaches. However, there are certain precautions you can take:

- + Speak with other visitors to the area, local health officers or parks representatives about the water condition before getting in any lake, pond or beach.
- + Check for warning signs at public beaches, lakes and picnic areas for notices stating that swimmer's itch may be present. Not all beaches have signage for swimmer's itch. If you are unsure about the water, avoid areas with lots of weed growth. There may be more snails and larvae around aquatic plants.
- + Use a pier or dock to enter the water to help reduce your risk of exposure, as there may be more larvae near the shore. Make sure these structures are approved for swimming and do not dive into unknown waters. See Resources for safety tips for swimmers.
- + Dry yourself off with a towel as soon as you come out of the water. If possible, have a shower and dry off right away. However, showering will not remove any larvae that have already burrowed under your skin.

HOW DO I TREAT SWIMMER'S ITCH?

There are some steps you can take that may reduce some of the itchiness. Check with your health care provider about what treatment is right for you.

Common treatments and advice include:

- + Apply plain calamine lotion.

- + Take antihistamines. For children, consult your health care provider such as your local pharmacist, family doctor or HealthLink BC. Antihistamines may make young children sleepy. Antihistamines may stimulate the nervous system, causing hyperactivity
- + Take shallow, lukewarm baths with 3 tablespoons of baking soda in the water.
- + Take colloidal oatmeal baths.
- + Apply cool compresses.
- + Avoid scratching. If you scratch too much the rash may become infected.

IS SWIMMER'S ITCH DANGEROUS?

The rash and itch can be very irritating, especially for young children, but there should not be any serious danger.

WHEN TO GET HELP

See your family doctor if a skin infection occurs from too much scratching.

RELEVANT RESOURCES

- + For safety tips for swimmers, see <https://www.healthlinkbc.ca/healthlinkbc-files/swimmers-safety-tips> or contact the Lifesaving Society at www.lifesaving.bc.ca for more information on swimming safety and drowning prevention.
- + For more information on swimmer's itch, see the Ministry of Environment's brochure at www2.gov.bc.ca/gov/content/environment/air-land-water/water/water-quality

Swimmer's Itch - Continued

TO LEARN MORE ASK

- + Your family doctor.
- + HealthLinkBC - call 8-1-1 (7-1-1 for deaf or hard of hearing) or go online to www.HealthLinkBC.ca

RECOMMENDED FOLLOW UP

- ☐ Follow up with your primary care provider in ____ days.

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Find this information sheet on the BC Emergency Medicine Network website:

www.bcemn.ca/clinical_resource/swimmer's-itch/