Swimmer’s Itch

WHAT IS SWIMMERS ITCH?

Swimmers’ itch is caused by flat worms (lava schistosome parasites) that penetrate the skin. The microscopic-sized parasites die shortly after penetrating the skin, but can cause allergic reactions in some people.

WHAT ARE THE SYMPTOMS?

A reddened spot appears within a few hours after the parasite enters the skin. The spot may grow in size – especially if scratched – and the skin surface swells, sometimes appearing as red welts. The irritated spot reaches its maximum size about in about 24 hours; the itching may continue for several days. The symptoms should disappear after a week.

HOW DO YOU GET SWIMMERS’ ITCH?

The parasites are found in shallow water near the shoreline. They look for mammals or birds to attach to. The parasites penetrate the outer layer of skin within several minutes after making contact.

WHEN CAN YOU GET SWIMMERS’ ITCH?

The first outbreaks of swimmers’ itch usually occur in late May or early June. Lakes in the northern half of Wisconsin usually have a swimmers’ itch season of about two weeks; lakes in the southern half of the state may have a season lasting one month. However, there’s no way to predict how long an outbreak may last. In some lakes it may last an entire summer.

SHOULD A DOCTOR BE CONSULTED?

In severe cases of swimmers’ itch the infected person may have a fever, feel nauseated, and have difficulty sleeping. Consult a physician if you’re not sure what caused the rash, if symptoms intensify or persist longer than one week, or if the symptoms cause undue discomfort. A physician can prescribe medication to reduce itching and topical creams to reduce swelling.

CAN SWIMMERS LESSEN THEIR CHANCES OF GETTING SWIMMERS’ ITCH?

Only about one-third of the people who contact the schistosome parasite develop swimmers’ itch. Children appear to be more susceptible since they tend to swim more often and swim in shallow water, where the cercaria larva tend to accumulate.

There are several measures that reduce the risk of contracting swimmers’ itch:

- Do not swim in areas where swimmer’s itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water;
- Towel down immediately upon leaving the water;
- Avoid swimming or wading in marshy areas where snails are commonly found;
- Do not attract birds (feeding them) to areas where people are swimming.

WHAT SHOULD BE USED FOR RELIEF OF SWIMMERS’ ITCH?

- Use corticosteriod cream
- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas
- Bathe in Epson salts or baking soda
- Soak in colloidal oatmeal baths, such as Aveeno
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash (made by stirring water into baking soda until reaches a paste-like consistency)
- Use an anti-itch lotion, such as Calamine lotion. Though difficult, try not to scratch. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected. If itching is severe, your health care provider may suggest prescription-strength lotions or creams to lessen your symptoms.

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www.co.shawano.wi.us
Shawano County Health Dept.

DO NOT REMOVE THIS SIGN

For more information go to:
http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/index.htm

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