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Patient Education:

# Swimmer's Itch

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# Swimmer's Itch

Swimmer's itch is an itchy rash that may happen after swimming or wading. It is also called cercarial dermatitis. It happens most often in fresh water but may also occur in salt water. It happens most often during warm weather. It cannot be spread from person to person (*not contagious*). The rash usually lasts for about 1 week.

## CAUSES

The rash is due to a microscopic parasite called a schistosome. This parasite normally infects the blood of water birds (*waterfowl*) and mammals (such as muskrats). The eggs of the parasite get into the water from the infected animal's feces. The parasite next infects snails. After a period of time, the parasite leaves the snail in a swimming form called a larva. The larva swims around looking to burrow into the skin of a water bird or mammal. Sometimes they burrow into the skin of a human by accident. The human is not a host for the parasite so the parasite dies under the skin. Swimmer's itch is an allergic reaction to the larva under the skin.

## SYMPTOMS

- Tingling, burning, or itching immediately after coming out of the water.
- Red bumps, most often on exposed skin that is not covered by a bathing suit. Bumps usually form on the legs and feet. The bumps can form small blisters.
- Itching. Sometimes, the itching is severe.

The itching and red bumps disappear after 10 to 15 hours, but later they return on the exposed skin that was in the water. Finally, the itching and rash go away after several days.

## DIAGNOSIS

Your caregiver can usually tell what the problem is by doing a physical exam.

## PREVENTION

- **Do not** swim in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water.
- **Do not** swim near or wade in marshy areas where snails are commonly found.
- Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water. Rub your skin firmly with the towel to help remove parasites. Rubbing with alcohol may also help.
- **Do not** feed birds near areas where people are swimming.

## TREATMENT

Most cases of swimmer's itch can be treated with home remedies. In severe cases, prescription strength antihistamine or steroid creams may be needed.

## HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas.

- Bathe in Epsom salts or baking soda in water.
- Soak in colloidal oatmeal baths.
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash. Stir water into baking soda until it reaches a paste-like consistency.
- Use an over-the-counter corticosteroid cream, antihistamine lotion, or take an antihistamine by mouth as directed by your caregiver.
- **Do not** scratch the rash. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected.

### **SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:**

- The rash gets worse.
- The rash does not improve after 3 days.
- Signs of infection develop, such as redness, tenderness, or yellowish-white fluid (*pus*).

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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