



SWIMMER'S ITCH (Cercarial Dermatitis)

Swimmer's itch (Cercarial Dermatitis) is caused by human contact with a parasite that normally is found in some species of birds or small animals. The adult stage of the parasite lives in the animals' intestines and is shed into the water with excreted feces. Snails feed off the waste and release the young parasite (called cercaria) into the water. When this parasite burrows into a person's skin it causes an allergic, itchy rash. The parasite is commonly found at the water's surface and near the shore.

Who gets this disease?

Anyone who swims in water where this parasite lives is susceptible. The parasite may live in both fresh and salt water.

How is it spread?

Most commonly, individuals get the infection by swimming or wading in infested water and then allowing water to evaporate off the skin rather than drying the skin with a towel. The parasite (cercaria) will burrow underneath the person's skin. Because these parasites cannot develop inside a human, they soon die. The infection is not spread from person-to-person.

What are the symptoms?

The symptoms include an initial prickling sensation after leaving the water shortly followed by an itchy rash, which reaches maximum intensity in 2 to 3 days and can persist for a week. Scratching the area may result in secondary bacterial infections. Repeated exposure increases a person's sensitivity to the parasite, possibly resulting in more severe symptoms.

What is the treatment?

It is best to check with a physician for treatment. Sometimes medication is given to ease the itching and allergic reaction. If secondary infection develops, antibiotic treatment may be indicated.

How can Swimmer's Itch be prevented?

1. Avoid swimming in known infested waters. Swim in deeper water. The parasite is usually found in shallow waters. Babies sitting along the shore are most vulnerable.
2. Vigorously towel your entire body immediately upon leaving the water. This will help brush off any cercaria that may be on the skin, also rinsing off with a quick shower as soon as you leave the water may be helpful.
3. Use a waterproof sunscreen. This forms a chemical barrier that may prevent the parasite from sticking to the body.

Who should be excluded?

There is no need to exclude someone from a facility since Swimmer's Itch is not spread from person-to-person.

Reportable?

No, Swimmer's Itch is not reportable by New Hampshire law to the Division of Public Health Services, Communicable Disease Control Section. However, public health professionals are available for consultation.

For questions in sampling public swimming areas, please contact the NH Department of Environmental Services, Public Beach Sampling Program at (603) 271-3414.