

Swimmer's Itch Facts...

Compliments of the Houghton Lake Improvement Board

What Is It?

Swimmer's itch is a patchy red skin rash associated with itching on the parts of the body that have been in the water. The medical term for swimmer's itch is "cercarial dermatitis." The itching occurs within 48 hours of infection and may last up to 7 days. In rare instances, swimmer's itch can be severe if a large portion of the body is infected.

Swimmer's Itch Control

Past efforts to control swimmer's itch on lakes statewide have focused primarily on the application of copper sulfate to kill infested snails. This approach has not proven entirely effective, and, if applied improperly, copper is potentially toxic to fish and other aquatic organisms.

What You Can Do

At present, there are no infallible methods for preventing swimmer's itch. Until an effective method of control is perfected, here are some things you can do to prevent swimmer's itch:

- After leaving the water, towel off immediately, shower, and scrub with brown soap.
- Use a waterproof sunscreen. This forms a chemical barrier that may discourage the cercariae.
- Avoid swimming in shallow shoreline areas, especially if the wind has been blowing steadily toward shore.
- Swim in deeper water. The cercariae that cause swimmer's itch are usually found in shallow waters and most easily attach to relatively inactive bodies. Babies sitting along the shore are most vulnerable.
- An antihistaminic or mild corticosteroid cream purchased over the counter in pharmacies can be beneficial. If the initial itching is severe, then scratching can cause abrasions and skin infections may develop. If the symptoms persist for longer than 3 days, you should consult a physician or dermatologist.
- Don't feed the waterfowl. You could be encouraging ducks and geese that are infested with the swimmer's itch parasite to remain in the area.

