

# Swimmer's Itch

## Symptoms

Within a few minutes to an hour after leaving the water, an infected person may feel a tingly or prickly sensation at the site where the parasite burrowed into the skin. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours. The itching can be intense and cause considerable scratching. Too much scratching can cause secondary skin infections requiring medical treatment. The itching usually disappears within a week or two.

## Treatment

Over-the-counter drugs designed to reduce itching may be useful (Caladryl cream, Calamine lotion, etc). Antimicrobial drugs may be needed for treatment of secondary infections. For further advice on treatment, please consult your physician.

## Prevention

Removing water from your body after swimming or wading in infected waters may be very

helpful in preventing the development of swimmer's itch.

This can be done by toweling off or showering **immediately** after getting out of the water. In addition, applying a *good* waterproof sunscreen before entering infected waters may help reduce the numbers of parasites that penetrate the skin.



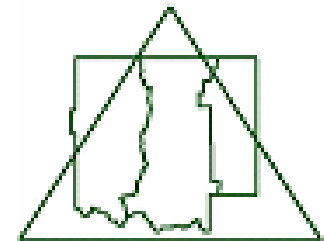
**For further information, Contact:**

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**Northeast Tri County  
Health District**



Each summer, visitors to Washington's many beautiful lakes find themselves suffering from a common condition called "Swimmer's Itch". Swimmer's Itch is reported frequently throughout Washington State, particularly in the western and northern regions. However, you can help prevent the occurrence of this annoying condition by taking a few precautions.

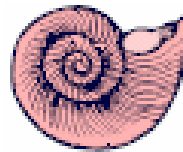


### What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch (*Schistosoma cercarial dermatitis*) is an itchy rash caused by small worm-like parasites called schistosomes (shiss-toe-soames). The para-

site lives in lakes and ponds and has a complicated life cycle. Part of its life is spent in the bodies of water snails and part in the blood stream of waterfowl or aquatic mammals.

At a certain point in the life cycle of the parasite, it leaves its snail host and floats near the surface of the water looking for a bird or other suitable mammal. It is at this point that the worm-like parasite will mistakenly burrow into human skin. Since humans are not the natural host of the parasite, it quickly dies. An allergic reaction soon develops which leads to intense itching and the appearance of a rash.



### Life Cycle of the Parasite

The adult form of the schistosome parasite exists in waterfowl and in certain aquatic animals such as muskrats and beavers. The eggs of the adult parasite develop in the intestinal tract of its host and are excreted into the water. The eggs hatch into a free-swimming worm-like

larval form that goes in search of a second host – a particular species of aquatic snail. After emerging from the snail host as an even larger worm-like form, the parasite then proceeds to look for its definitive host (duck, goose, beaver, etc). After finding this host, it penetrates the skin and develops into the mature adult parasite, ready to repeat the cycle.

Humans get involved in the life cycle of the parasite purely by accident. When a swimmer leaves the water, a certain amount of water remains on the skin. If the water is not quickly towel dried off, the free-swimming form of the parasite will burrow into the skin. Children are most infected due to their habits of swimming or wading in the water and then playing on the beach as the water evaporates from the skin.

