

What Is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by tiny worms (too small to see) found in ponds, lakes, and sometimes in the ocean. These worms are common throughout North America.

How Do You Get Swimmer's Itch?

The worm that causes swimmer's itch lives in the gut of birds, such as ducks, and some animals, such as beavers. As the worm grows, it lays eggs in the water with the bird's feces. Larvae hatch from the eggs and look for snails in which to grow. After the larvae have grown into baby worms, they leave the snail and try to burrow into other birds. Sometimes they get into the skin of swimmers by mistake. This can cause swimmer's itch.

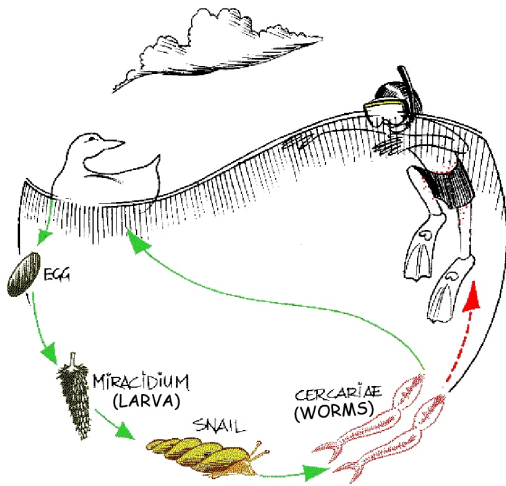


Fig. 1: Life Cycle of Swimmer's Itch Worms

How Can I Avoid Getting Swimmer's Itch?

The best way to avoid getting swimmer's itch is to avoid swimming where the worms are living. Check for a warning sign near the water, or ask the park owner if other campers have had swimmer's itch.



You can also avoid swimming in ponds or lakes where there are a lot of water plants. These plants are great homes for snails (see figure 1) and swimmer's itch worms.

If you decide to swim in ponds or lakes, you should:

- avoid swimming on bright mornings with onshore wind, as worms are more active at this time.
- dry off well with a towel as soon as you leave the water. This will help to remove any of the worms on your skin.
- avoid swimming for a long time in shallow water.
- move around often while in the water.

Note: Children are more likely to get swimmer's itch because their skin is more sensitive, they play in shallow water, and enter and exit the water more often.

What are the Signs and Symptoms?

You may not notice your first contact with swimmer's itch worms. But if they attach to you again, your body will be more sensitive and may react with these signs:

- brief tingling on your skin
- mild swelling of the skin eight or ten hours later
- itchy red spots
- skin rash

The swelling can last for about a week, but the itching usually lasts for a couple of days. These symptoms often go away on their own after about two weeks, but scratching could cause an infection.

Remember: Swimmer's itch cannot be passed from person to person.



What Should I Do If I Get Swimmer's Itch?

If you get swimmer's itch, you should avoid scratching which could make the rash worse. An anti-itch cream or lotion could be used for some relief. If the itching lasts for more than three days, or if the rash gets worse, see a doctor.

Please call the Government Service Centre or regional Health and Community Services office nearest you to report any cases of swimmer's itch. This will help to let other people know about the risk of getting swimmer's itch in the water where you swam.



For More Information

If you would like more information about swimmer's itch, please call an Environmental Health Officer at the Government Service Centre:

Regional Government Service Centre

Locations:

Happy Valley-Goose Bay
Corner Brook
Grand Falls-Windsor
Gander
Clarenville
Harbour Grace
St. John's

or, an Environmental Health Manager at the regional Health and Community Services office:

Regional Health and Community Services & Integrated Health Board

Locations:

Happy Valley-Goose Bay
St. Anthony
Corner Brook
Gander
Holyrood
St. John's



Department of Health and Community Services
Department of Government Services and Lands

Regional Health and Community Services Boards

March 2003

Going To The Beach This Summer?

AVOID SWIMMER'S ITCH



RECREATION WATER AWARENESS



GOVERNMENT OF
NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR