



Swimmer's Itch (*non-human bilharzia*)

What is Swimmer's Itch?

- Swimmer's itch is the result of free-swimming **parasitic** flatworms (blood flukes) that cause severe skin infection (schistosomal dermatitis).
- Severe rash on the skin is the main symptom. If untreated, scratching can draw blood.
- Sometimes allergic reaction occurs; either immediately after penetration or the allergy can build up to a maximum approximately 2 weeks after infection.
- The primary hosts of this parasite are geese, gulls or other animals, but sometimes the cercariae (larval form of the parasite) penetrate the human skin and subsequently an allergic reaction or local skin irritation.

How is Swimmer's Itch transmitted?

- One can contract schistosomal dermatitis when you swim in water that is frequented by water birds. These birds are the source of blood flukes in the water. The cercariae penetrate the skin when water is allowed to evaporate from the skin.
- The transmission route is water-based (water contact).

How can Swimmer's Itch be treated?

- Antibiotic medicine can be used to shorten the infection period and for a quicker recovery.
- Treat the rash with calamine lotion to lessen the itching.
- Use antihistamine medication.
- Recovery is spontaneous within 1 to 4 weeks.

How can Swimmer's Itch be prevented?

- Do not swim in contaminated water.
- Prevent skin contact with infected water.
- Take a shower immediately after swimming.
- Rub the skin with towel directly after swimming to prevent water evaporation from the skin. Wash towel in warm water to disinfect it.
- Apply an astringent such as alcohol to skin directly after swimming to reduce fluke penetration.

Reference: DWAF (2003). Management of water-related microbial diseases, RSA

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