

# Swimmer's Itch

## Definition

- An itchy harmless rash caused by tiny parasites in fresh water lakes
- A less common rash can also occur in salt water (called clam digger's itch)

## Health Information

### Symptoms of Swimmer's Itch

- Itchy skin rash
- Begins within 2 hours of swimming in a fresh water lake.
- The rash only occurs on areas exposed to the lake water. The legs are often involved. The bathing suit area is often spared.
- The first symptom is itching or burning of the skin.
- Then small red spots appear within 1 or 2 hours.
- The spots turn into small red lumps over 1 or 2 days.
- The spots can be quite itchy for up to 7 days. The rash slowly fades away over 2 weeks.

### Cause

- Swimmer's itch is caused by a very tiny parasite. You can only see it with a microscope. It gets into the skin of humans by mistake. The spots appear at sites where a parasite has gotten into the skin.
- The rash and itching are the body's reaction to parasites in the skin.
- This parasite can be found in lakes in every state (US). It is also found in lakes in Canada and over 30 other countries. In the US, Michigan and other Great Lakes region states are most involved.
- The parasites get into the lakes from the droppings of water birds. Their normal life cycle involves birds and snails. It dies off quickly in human skin.
- Repeat contacts: Swimmer's itch is the body's allergic reaction to the parasite. The more the exposures, the faster the rash occurs. It also causes the rash and itching to become more severe.

## Care Advice

### 1. Overview on Swimmer's Itch:

- Swimmer's itch is caused by a small parasite found in many lakes. It is less common in salt water.
- The main symptoms are itching and a rash. The itchy rash most often starts within 2 hours of being in the water.
- For swimmers, the rash can be widespread.
- For children who wade, the rash may occur only on the legs.
- No medicine is needed. Reason: The parasites die once they pass into human skin. Itching is an allergy to them.
- Here is some care advice that should help.

### 2. Steroid Cream for Itching:

- To help with the itch, put 1% hydrocortisone cream (such as Cortaid) on the rash. No prescription is needed.
- Use 3 times per day as needed.
- Baking soda paste is another option. Make this by putting baking soda into a cup. Slowly, stir in water until it reaches a thickness like paste. Put it on the itchy spots as needed.

3. **Cold Pack for Itching:**
  - Put a cold pack on the most itchy spots. You can also use ice wrapped up in wet washcloth.
  - Do this for 20 minutes as needed.
4. **Allergy Medicine for Itching:**
  - If itching becomes severe, give a dose of Benadryl.
  - No prescription is needed. Age limit: 1 year and older.
5. **Try Not to Scratch:**
  - Help your child not to scratch.
  - Cut the fingernails short.
  - Reason: Prevent a skin infection from bacteria.
6. **What to Expect:**
  - The spots turn into small red lumps over 1 to 2 days.
  - The spots can be quite itchy for up to 7 days.
  - The rash gradually fades away over 2 weeks.
7. **Return to School:**
  - The rash cannot be spread to others.
  - Children with swimmer's itch do not need to miss any school.
8. **Prevent Swimmer's Itch:**
  - Avoid swimming in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem.
  - Towel yourself dry right after swimming or wading. Reason: Wipe off parasites before they get under the skin.
  - The rash is worse with each exposure. So, it's very important to try to prevent recurrences.

## Call Your Doctor If

- Itching becomes severe
- Rash lasts over 2 weeks
- You think your child needs to be seen
- Your child becomes worse

### Pediatric Care Advice

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