Swimmer's Itch, Cercarial Dermatitis

Swimmer's itch is an itchy rash that may happen after swimming or wading. It is also called cercarial dermatitis. It happens most often in fresh water but may also occur in salt water. It happens most often during warm weather. It is not contagious (you cannot spread it to others or catch it from other people.)

CAUSES

The rash is due to a microscopic parasite called a schistosome. This parasite normally infects the blood of water birds and mammals. The eggs of the parasite get into the water from the infected animal's feces. The parasite next infects snails. After a period of time, the parasite leaves the snail in a swimming form called a larva. The larva swims around looking to burrow into the skin of a water bird or mammal. Sometimes they burrow into the skin of a human by mistake. The human is not a host for the parasite so the parasite dies under the skin. The rash is an allergic reaction to the larva under the skin.

SYMPTOMS

The symptoms of swimmer's itch can include:

- Tingling, burning or itching immediately after coming out of infested water.
- Red bumps – most often on exposed skin (not covered by a bathing suit or waders) – usually on the legs and feet. The bumps can form small blisters.
- Itching – sometimes very severe.

The rash can last for about a week. The rash and itching may be worse with future exposure.

DIAGNOSIS

Diagnosis of swimmer's itch is made by physical exam and the story of exposure to infected water.

TREATMENT

Most cases of swimmer's itch can be treated with home remedies. In severe cases, prescription strength antihistamine or steroid creams may be needed.

HOME CARE INSTRUCTIONS

- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas
- Bathe in Epsom salts or baking soda in water
- Soak in colloidal oatmeal baths, such as Aveeno
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash (made by stirring water into baking soda until it reaches a paste-like consistency)
- Use an anti-itch lotion, such as Calamine lotion, or you may take an antihistamine by mouth as the instructions with the medications direct.
- Use an over the counter corticosteroid cream
- Although it might be hard, try not to scratch. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected.

To reduce the chances of getting swimmer's itch:

- Do not swim in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water.
- Do not swim near or wade in marshy areas where snails are commonly found.
- Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water. Rub your skin firmly with the towel to rub parasites off.
- Do not attract birds (by feeding them) to areas where people are swimming.
- Encourage health officials to post signs on shorelines where swimmer's itch is a current problem.

SEEK MEDICAL CARE IF:

- The rash is worse.
- The rash is not improving in 3 days.
- The rash is infected or has:
  - Areas of redness.
  - Tenderness (pain).
  - Draining pus.

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