



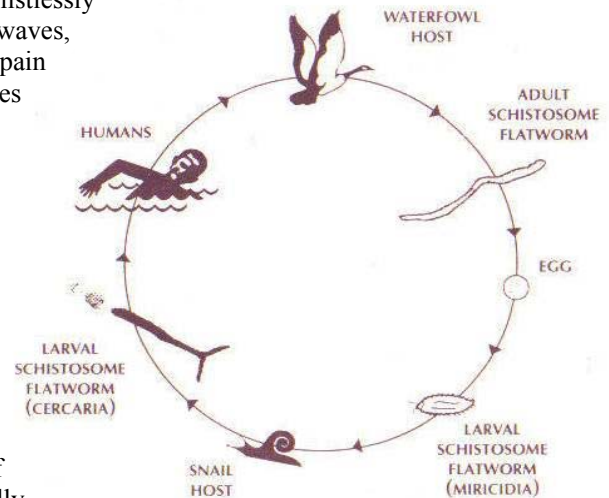
# Itching Swimmers:

*Swimmer's itch invades Northern Michigan lakes*



Every summer, water enthusiasts stand listlessly at the shore, staring into the loping waves, wondering if a quick swim is worth the pain it may cause when swimmer's itch invades their skin. Here's what you need to know to protect you and your children from the nasty rash.

Swimmer's itch, or cercarial dermatitis, is a skin rash caused by parasitic flatworms in a larval stage. The larva, known as cercaria, emerge from a specific snail species to search for a suitable host, such as duck, blackbird, or rodent. However, cercaria sometimes mistakenly burrow into an unsuspecting swimmer's skin. Since human flesh does not provide the proper environment for cercaria to mature, the larva dies, causing an allergic reaction in many people. Most of the time, however, cercaria infect birds and rodents instead of humans. The larva invades the host's vascular system, eventually making its way to the liver to mate. Females then deposit eggs, which exit with the mammal's feces. Upon reaching the water, the egg hatches into a larva called miracidia and begins swimming, looking for a snail host where it begins the process all over again. This cycle repeats throughout the summer with the first reports of swimmer's itch usually occurring in late May or early June.



The "Swimmer's Itch" (Schistosome) Life Cycle

(ILLUSTRATIONS NOT TO SCALE)

Swimmers may feel a dull, prickly sensation when leaving the water as the parasitic larva enter the skin. Many who come into contact with cercaria never have an allergic reaction, however many react quite strongly. Swimmer's itch can be identified by the small, reddened areas that develop at the point of cercaria entry within 24 hours of exposure. Itching and burning tends to be the worst in the mornings during the first four to five days after exposure. Swimmer's itch symptoms are sometimes confused with bites from chiggers or poison ivy. Chigger bites are generally located near points of contact

## Avoid swimmer's itch!

- Don't feed the birds
- Towel dry
- Swim on the northern and western shores
- Avoid concrete or rock walls in the water
- Avoid swimming in shallow water

between skin and clothing near the ankles or wrists, but cercaria points of entry are random on exposed areas of the body. A swimmer's itch rash will not spread or form watery blisters like poison ivy might. Though many studies have been done, so little is known about the host-parasite relationship that it is impossible to predict where outbreaks of swimmer's itch may occur.

Beach goers can take precautions to reduce the chance of contracting this uncomfortable dermatitis. First, swimmers can discourage birds from hanging around swimming areas by not feeding them. Swimmers should towel dry themselves to remove cercaria that may have attached themselves to the skin. Studies have also shown that swimmers on the northern and western shores of lakes are significantly less likely to contract swimmer's itch due to the wind patterns of Northern Michigan. Swimmers should also avoid areas where concrete or rock walls have been placed in the water as these walls provide homes for snails that may carry cercaria. Finally, swimmers should avoid prolonged or repeated swimming in shallow water, as cercaria tend to concentrate in these areas.

To contact Tip of the Mitt Watershed Council ,  
call (231) 347-1181  
or visit [www.watershedcouncil.org](http://www.watershedcouncil.org)