

Health & Safety Tip #93

Swimmers Itch

Bathers who frequent lakes and ponds should be aware of contracting Swimmer's Itch during the warm summer months.

Swimmer's Itch is caused by a microscopic parasite, which spends the larval stage of its life in water. The adult parasite lives in the blood of birds. The eggs of the adult parasite are passed out of the bird and develop into larvae, which then seek out host snails. As the larvae mature, they pass again into the water in search of a bird's blood to inhabit.

Concentrations of the parasite are greater near the water surface where they can contact birds. They also tend to concentrate in shallow waters late in the day as a result of incoming winds. Sometimes they invade humans by mistake, but die shortly after their intrusion as they cannot survive in our system.

Swimmer's Itch is the itchy rash that develops when human antibodies destroy the parasite. Bathers experience a tingling sensation shortly after getting out of the water, then red spots appear where the parasite has penetrated hair follicles. Gradually, the tingling disappears and the spots enlarge becoming itchy like an insect bite. The condition usually lasts for a couple of days, but may persist for up to two weeks.

You can reduce the chances of contracting Swimmer's Itch by following some easy tips:

- Avoid infested areas near dense aquatic vegetation, which attracts snails.
- Towel down briskly or shower immediately after leaving the water. This will help remove the larvae before they penetrate the skin.
- If these measures don't succeed and a rash appears, try the following treatments:
 - o a baking soda bath (three tablespoons in shallow water)
 - o antihistamines
 - o anti-itch lotions such as Calamine

If the itch appears severe, please consult your physician. If indicated, the Vancouver Island Health Authority's Health Protection & Environmental Services Office will post warning signs in the identified areas.

For further information, contact an Environmental Health Officer at your nearest VIHA Health Protection & Environmental Services Office. To view contact information on-line, go to: www.viha.ca/mho/departement_program_list/hpes/contact_info.htm

