

Take Precautions to Reduce Swimmer's Itch

In response to calls from the public, the Municipality of Neebing is advising swimmers at local beaches to take steps to reduce their risk of swimmer's itch.

Swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to certain parasites that infect water birds (e.g. ducks, geese or gulls) and some mammals (e.g. raccoons, muskrats). These parasites are released from infected snails into water. The parasites prefer bird or mammal hosts, however, if they make contact with a human, they will burrow into the skin causing an allergic reaction and rash. Since the parasites cannot develop inside humans, they quickly die.

Within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water, swimmers may feel tingling, burning or itching of the skin. Small reddish pimples appear within twelve hours and may develop into small blisters. The area will be itchy, but scratching may result in secondary infections. The itchy feeling may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away. The more often individuals swim or wade in contaminated water, the sooner the symptoms will appear and they may be more intense.

There are some precautions that you can take to reduce the risk of swimmer's itch.

If you know that swimmer's itch is present in an area, avoid swimming there. Be sure to towel off briskly and take a shower right after leaving the water even if you are not sure if swimmer's itch is present.

It is also important to not attract birds and stay away from areas with water plants, which usually harbour snails.

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require medical attention. If a rash is present, swimmers may want to try the following for relief:

- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas
- Take a bath in Epsom salts or baking soda
- Soak in a bath made from colloidal oatmeal; this is a special oatmeal that cannot be eaten
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash (stir water into baking soda until it turns into a paste)
- Use an anti-itch lotion
- Contact your health care provider if the itching is more than you can handle.

Links to additional information, as well as a detailed fact sheet, is available on the Health Unit's website at TBDHU.COM. A public health inspector is available to answer questions on swimmers itch by calling at 625-5930 or toll-free at 1-888-294-6630, ext. 5930