

# Swimmer's Itch

By Suze Hargraves

I hear the water lapping at the shore of the lake. Splat. Splat. Splat. It's a peaceful sound. The mountains are pristine against the azure blue sky. The lake's ebony surface sparkles as if sprinkled with diamonds. Reveling in my happy place, my head turns lazily to admire the view when I come upon a sign. I'm compelled, by my nature, to come immediately out of my happy place and read: "Please Don't Feed the Ducks. Avoid Swimmer's Itch." Humph. Well so much for my happy place. Now I have to find out what the heck a duck has to do with itching. Do you really want to know that answer? Of course I do. I go immediately to my other happy place: the internet.

The American Osteopathic College of Dermatology describes Swimmer's Itch thusly: Swimmer's itch is a patchy red pinpoint skin rash associated with itching on the parts of the body that have been in the water. Swimmer's itch is usually not severe. After the initial transient itching it will disappear without treatment. The itching occurs within 48 hours and may last up to 7 days. Rarely, it can be severe if a large proportion of the body is affected.

Since we're primarily lake dwellers around these parts I'll focus on the freshwater version of Swimmer's Itch. Trematode parasites of aquatic/migrating birds are the most frequent cause of Swimmer's Itch acquired in a lake or river. Apparently the parasites start out using snails as a nursery and then move on to aquatic birds. The birds then go for a swim. We, in turn, take a dip on a hot summer day. The befuddled parasite mistakes the human for a duck and before you know it you're host to a confused parasite and a whole lot of itchy red bumps.

Although Swimmer's Itch probably won't kill an infection can be caused by scratching just as with any other skin condition. Usually an over-the-counter antihistamine or corticosteroid cream will do the trick. Remember, always consult with your healthcare provider or pharmacist before taking any over-the-counter medicine if you are currently taking prescription drugs. Some interactions can be dangerous. Always read the labels including the warnings and take them seriously. If the rash appears to be getting worse, or not improving, you may need to seek medical attention.

All this brings us full circle again to the sign: Please Don't Feed the Ducks-Avoid Swimmer's Itch. I know they're cute and rather personable, but resist the urge to share your lunch with Mr. Duck. The problem with ducks is they gossip. One ducks tell another duck about your sandwich and before you know it you're surrounded by flocks of waddling parasite hosts. The next thing you know you've got an itchy rash. Some blabbermouth duck and his buddies, who could have fended for themselves quite nicely, now have a taste for deli creations. Not a very good trade off now is it? Do what the sign says and don't feed the ducks. Don't leave stuff behind for the ducks to nibble either. That still qualifies as feeding.

We love to see ducks swimming in our lakes. That's a good thing but let's keep them away from our swimming areas and beaches when possible. There's plenty of lake out there for all of us. We don't need to share space when it comes to swimming. Without the attraction of a buffet, the ducks will naturally choose to keep to themselves. Keep Swimmer's Itch at bay while enjoying our happy places we call lakes and rivers this summer.

Let the ducks find another hot spot for a snack.

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