

Swimmer's Itch



Brenda Vallancourt and a couple of her neighbors had an awful experience recently with an itchy rash after swimming in the lake. Her neighbor sought medical treatment for relief and was told it was swimmer's itch. They are not the only ones. The Bear Lake Preservation Association (BLPA) had several reports from other lake swimmers.

Brenda said it was good to know the parasites die right away. The extreme itching lasted a couple of days and the awful looking red rash lasted about a week. Benedryl got her and her family through those first couple of uncomfortable days.

According to the Limnologists at University of Florida, the hundreds of migrating cormorants which visited the Bear Lakes (Big Bear, Little Bear, Cub) earlier this year, could have contributed to why our problem skyrocketed. With permission from the University of Florida Lakewatch, the following is a reprint of a very informative article about swimmer's itch in The Beginner's Guide to Water Management

AN UNWELCOME SUMMER VISITOR: SWIMMER'S ITCH (SCHISTOSOME CERCARIAL DERMATITIS)

Summer is here once again in all its hot, humid, buggy glory and chances are dedicated lake-goers are smack dab in the middle of it all as they enjoy any number of aquatic activities.

However, there is one summer occurrence that folks should be aware of as it can certainly take the fun out of playing in your favorite lake.

It's known as swimmer's itch and similar to poison ivy, anyone who has ever had an outbreak usually doesn't forget it.

Swimmer's itch is the result of a parasitic flatworm that makes its presence known

to lake-goers on rare occasions. It is most often experienced in the warmer summer months when greater numbers of people are out swimming in and enjoying their lake.

Initial symptoms are usually experienced soon after swimming or submersing oneself in a lake and they include a tingling sensation soon after drying off the exposed parts of the body. Later, the development of small red spots occurs, then the tingling ceases and the red spots become itchier. The degree of discomfort varies among individuals, depending on the severity of infestation and prior exposure. The more often one is exposed to swimmer's itch, the more sensitive they could be to future outbreaks.

So where does this aquatic pest come from? This tiny parasitic flatworm that is capable of causing so much discomfort among humans originates in the bloodstream of some aquatic bird species. Adult worms live in the bird's digestive tract and their eggs are transferred to the lake via the excrement of the bird.

Once in the water, the eggs hatch and the larvae search for a certain species of snail, which they will invade and use as the secondary host. Larvae live in the snail and eventually emerge as a secondary microscopic larval stage that is known as cercaria. At this point, the cercaria normally will seek out aquatic birds such as ducks to complete the life cycle but sometimes mistakenly invade human skin instead. Since humans are not the correct host species, the cercaria soon dies and leaves the swimmer with an itchy but harmless welt.

If symptoms develop, over-the-counter anti itch medications can help such as lotions and antihistamines. Your pharmacist can recommend something suitable for you.

One way to reduce your chances of contracting swimmer's itch and still enjoy your lake is to avoid

swimming for long periods in shallow water. It is believed that cercarias are more concentrated there.

Also, if an area has a history of producing swimmer's itch, avoid swimming there, especially if there is an onshore wind.

Drying off immediately after getting out of the lake may help as some species of cercaria only enter the skin as the water dries on the body.

A few more words of wisdom: Don't feed aquatic bird species, as this can encourage them to defecate in areas where people swim and it also makes the birds dependent on humans for food. One way to reduce your chances of contracting swimmer's itch and still enjoy your lake is to avoid swimming for long periods in shallow water.

For more information, feel free to contact your LAKEWATCH regional coordinator at 1-800-LAKEWATCH (1-800-525-3928).

Many thanks to Debi Mosely for her writing and assistance with this newsletter.

Wekiwa (We-Ki'-Wa) or Wekiva (We-Ki'-Va) — You Decide!

The name is derived from the Creek - Wekiwa meaning spring of water. The actual spelling of the Wekiwa or Wekiva river's name has often been disputed. Wekiwa was the original name used by the Indians who lived throughout the entire State of Florida. "We" refers to water and "Kiwa" means spring. Vague history shows the spelling of Wekiva most likely

came into official use in the late 1800s because of its spelling on maps. Developers and settlers of the area then adopted the spelling for roads and neighborhood development. Some later maps, however, show the spelling as Wekiwa. This is why you will see this word spelled two different ways. For the record, both are acceptable spellings.