

Sawyer County residents are reminded that when the summer heat strikes, it is wise to prevent the emergence of a common summer irritation — swimmer's itch.

Eileen Simak, Sawyer County Health & Human Service health officer, noted that swimmer's itch is a skin rash caused by a parasite (shistosomes) that ordinarily infects birds, semiaquatic mammals and snails. Common grackles, red-winged blackbirds, ducks, geese, swans, muskrats and moles have been found to carry the parasite.

As part of their developmental life cycle, the parasites are released from infected snails, migrate through the water, and are capable of penetrating the skin of humans. After penetration, the parasites remain in the skin and die but can cause an allergic reaction in some people. The parasite does not mature, reproduce or cause any permanent infection.

People who swim or wade in infested water may experience this itchy rash. Only about one third of the people who come in contact with the parasite develop swimmer's itch.

All age groups and both sexes can be involved, but children are most often infected because of their habits of swimming or wading in shallow water and playing on the beach as water evaporates from the skin. Swimmer's itch may be prevalent among bathers in lakes in many parts of the world, including the Great Lakes region of north America and certain coastal beaches.

Person-to-person spread of swimmer's itch does not occur. Whenever infested water is allowed to evaporate off the skin, an initial tingling sensation may be felt, which is associated with the parasite's penetration into the skin. The irritated spot reaches its maximum size after about 24 hours; the itching may continue for several days. The symptoms should disappear within a week.

A person's first exposure to infested water may not result in the itchy rash. Repeated exposure increases a person's allergic sensitivity to the parasite and increases the likelihood of rash development. Symptoms may appear within one to two hours of exposure.

There is no treatment necessary for swimmer's itch. Some people may get relief from the itching by applying skin lotions or creams to the infected site.

The first outbreaks usually occur in late May or early June. Outbreaks in Wisconsin may last from two weeks in the northern lakes to a month in the southern lakes. In some lakes it may last the entire summer.

Towelng off immediately after swimming or wading in infested water can be helpful in preventing rash development. Other avoidance measures include:

- • Swim in water away from the shore.
- • Avoid swimming in areas where snails have accumulated.
- • Don't encourage birds to stay near swimming areas by feeding them.

For more information, call Sawyer County Health & Human Services at (715) 634-4806 or 1-800-569-4156.