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SWIMMER'S ITCH APPEARING ALONG LONG ISLAND SOUND COASTLINE

The Westchester County Department of Health today announced that swimmer's itch, a skin rash caused by certain parasites of birds and mammals, has been identified along the coastline of the Long Island Sound. Incidents of swimmer's itch have been identified by residents on beaches along Long Island Sound from New Rochelle to Rye. Swimmer's itch is a natural occurrence at this time of year and is most common in areas that have large numbers of waterfowl.

Swimmers itch is a skin rash caused by certain parasites of birds and mammals. The parasite is carried in the intestines of waterfowl and aquatic mammals. Snails become infected with the parasites and release larvae into the water. The larvae search out a suitable host. The itch occurs when the larvae accidentally penetrate human skin rather than their natural hosts. The red itchy rash of swimmer's itch can be extremely annoying but is not dangerous and will not spread. However, scratching the itch could cause infection. The swimmer may get the infection by swimming or wading in infested water and then allowing water to evaporate off the skin rather than briskly drying the skin with a towel. Person to person spread does not occur.

"Since the parasites that cause swimmer's itch are associated with waterfowl, municipal officials and beach owners may wish to take preventive measures to discourage geese from populating in the beach areas," stated Joshua Lipsman, M.D., M.P.H., Commissioner of Health. "Residents are advised not to feed any waterfowl. Feeding waterfowl may aggravate the problem by encouraging the geese to remain concentrated in a particular beach area."

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require treatment. However, corticosteroid creams, calamine lotion and colloidal oatmeal baths can be used to minimize the itching. It's important not to scratch, because scratching may cause the rash to become infected. If itching is severe, contact your health care provider who may prescribe lotion or creams to lessen your symptoms.

There are a few simple things that bathers can do to reduce their chances of developing swimmer's itch.

- Towel down briskly right after leaving the water to help remove the parasites; sometimes the parasites can be rubbed off before they fully penetrate the skin.
- Take a shower immediately and dry off briskly after leaving the beach.
- Avoid shallow waters near the shore since itch-causing larvae usually live near the shore.
- Do not feed waterfowl. Feeding waterfowl may aggravate the problem by concentrating potential hosts in a limited area.

MORE

To obtain a fact sheet on swimmer's itch, call the Westchester County Department of Health at (914) 813-5000 or visit the Health Department's website at www.westchestergov.com/health.