



City of Detroit Lakes

1025 ROOSEVELT AVE. DETROIT LAKES, MN 56501

Swimmer's Itch Meeting Agenda April 16, 2026 City Hall Committee Room

1. Introductions
2. Background/Purpose of Meeting
3. City of Detroit Lakes Treatment Procedure
 - a. Copper Sulfate 2x per summer
4. DNR Input
 - a. Other Treatment Options
5. Options for Summer 2026
 - a. Education
 - b. Creams/Oils

- **Swimmer’s Itch Is Not a Public Health Threat** – Swimmer’s itch is an allergic reaction that can be contracted in many of Minnesota’s lakes. It can have varying levels of impacts on individuals depending on their sensitivity to it. At the same time, [Minnesota Department of Health says](#) swimmer’s itch is not a public health threat – it is not infectious and does not spread from person to person. It is found throughout the world, and in many ways it is similar to other naturally occurring nuisances in the outdoors that cause allergic reactions - things like poison ivy.
- **Merganser Brood Removal: Effectiveness Is Limited and Inconsistent** – Common Mergansers are one of several species of waterfowl that are part of the life cycle of the parasite that can cause swimmer’s itch. They are a regulated game species in Minnesota and contribute to ecosystem biodiversity. They serve as top-level aquatic predators, helping control populations of small fish and maintaining balanced lake ecosystems. Removal of these birds may unintentionally disrupt food webs, potentially resulting in overabundant forage fish or increased pressure from invasive species. The science is not conclusive that removing common mergansers is an effective way to minimize swimmer’s itch. Even brief presence of non-resident (migratory) birds can introduce or maintain parasite levels sufficient to cause swimmer’s itch, reducing the long-term effectiveness of local brood removal.
- **Non-Lethal Management Options Exist** - Personal preventative methods are effective for people who are concerned about exposure to the swimmer’s itch schistosome including rubbing with a towel to dry off immediately after swimming, wearing protective swimwear or creams, swimming offshore from boats or rafts rather than swimming along the shoreline.

MN DNR denied the lethal take permit request from Pelican Lake and Bay Lake associations last year, media statement: “The Minnesota Department of Natural Resources (DNR) denied permit requests to lethally remove common mergansers on Pelican Lake and Bay Lake to control swimmer’s itch. Scientific consensus does not support the removal of common mergansers or other waterfowl to mitigate swimmer’s itch, and there could be significant ecological harm from doing so. We know that swimmer’s itch occurs on many lakes across the state and as the agency responsible for natural resource management in Minnesota, we cannot set the precedent of wide-scale removal of wildlife from natural habitats. We recognize that people can experience swimmer’s itch in varying degrees depending on their sensitivity level, and for some it can be very uncomfortable. At the same time, it is important to note that according to the Minnesota Department of Health, swimmer’s itch is not a public health threat – it is not infectious and does not spread from person to person. It is found throughout the world, and in many ways, it is like other naturally occurring nuisances in the outdoors like poison ivy. The best course of action to prevent swimmer’s itch is to take personal precautions [recommended by the Minnesota Department of Health](#).”


Swimmer's itch

What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's itch is a **temporary skin rash** that is caused by an allergic reaction to microscopic parasites that are carried by waterfowl, semi-aquatic mammals, and snails. As a part of their life cycle, these parasites are released by infected snails into the water, where they may come in contact with people and burrow into their skin.

The good news is the organism that causes swimmer's itch cannot complete its life history in the human body. Your body's immune system detects it as a foreign protein, then attacks and kills it shortly after it penetrates your skin. The itching and **welts are not caused by the organism living under your skin, but by an allergic reaction.**

Not everyone is sensitive to swimmer's itch. Some people show no symptoms of swimmer's itch even though others swimming at the same time and place break out severely. Much like poison ivy, however, your sensitivity to swimmer's itch will increase with each exposure. There are several over the counter remedies your pharmacist can recommend to help relieve the discomfort, but see your physician for a definitive diagnosis.

[Read more about Swimmer's Itch from the Minnesota Department of Health](https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/swimitch/index.html)
(<https://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/swimitch/index.html>) 

Where does it come from?

The organism that causes swimmer's itch has a complicated life history.

1. It starts out as a worm (parasite) in the intestinal lining of aquatic birds and mammals (host).
2. The worms lay eggs inside the host animal.
3. The eggs are eliminated by the host and drop to the bottom of the lake.
4. Then the eggs hatch into **miracidia** that swim around in the water until they find a snail.
5. Once they find a snail, they live inside them and develop into **cercariae**.
6. The snails then release the cercariae back into the water where they look for another host - aquatic birds, mammals or humans.
7. When the cercariae find a potential host, they burrow into the host's skin.
8. If the host is suitable, the life cycle starts all over again.
9. **Humans are not a suitable host and the cercariae die after penetrating the skin.**

Swimmer's itch is not spread from person to person. It is found throughout the world, and in many ways, it is similar to other naturally occurring nuisances in the outdoors that cause allergic reactions - things like poison ivy.

Reducing the odds of getting swimmer's itch

The parasite that causes swimmer's itch only lives for a day or so and typically swim around in the upper few inches of lake water. This increases their chances of coming into contact with a duck. Once the parasite is in the duck, it easily moves around the lake, and ultimately along the shoreline.

There are actions you can take to help reduce your odds of getting swimmer's itch.

- **Keep waterfowl away from your dock and shoreline.** If you are feeding waterfowl (ducks and geese) from your dock, stop. If ducks like to rest on your dock, do what you can to discourage them. You can try putting an owl windsock or statue on your dock and move it around occasionally, so the ducks don't become accustomed to it.
- **Stay out of the water by the shore.** The swimmer's itch organism may originate somewhere else in the lake and is being brought to your shoreline by wave action or currents. You may want to consider swimming from a raft or boat farther out from shore where you are less likely to come into contact with the parasite that causes swimmer's itch. Of course, this strategy may not be practical if you don't swim or have young children who want to play in the water near shore.
- **Apply a water repellent substance** such as petroleum jelly, waterproof sunscreen or other skin oils to reduce the ability of the parasite that causes swimmer's itch from penetrating the skin.
- **Rash guard clothing:** Wearing protective swimwear has been shown to create a physical barrier against parasite entry.
- **Dry off with a towel as soon as you get out of the water.** When you get out of the lake, **don't let the water evaporate off your skin.** The organism in the droplets of water on your skin will look for somewhere to go as the droplet of water evaporates.
- **Timing of swimming:** Concentrations of the parasite that can cause swimmer's itch are typically higher in the morning and in warm, shallow water. Swimming in deeper water and later in the day reduces risk.
- **Consult with your doctor on potential use of oral antihistamines to reduce or eliminate allergic response to exposure.**

Waterfowl and their role in swimmer's itch

In Minnesota, several species of waterfowl are hosts that sustain the parasite lifecycle. These include common mergansers, mallards, wood ducks and Canada geese.


All waterfowl species contribute to ecosystem biodiversity. For example, common mergansers serve as top-level aquatic predators, helping control populations of small fish and maintaining balanced lake ecosystems.

Removal of these birds may unintentionally disrupt food webs, potentially resulting in overabundant forage fish or increased pressure from invasive species. Widespread adoption of waterfowl removal could threaten regional populations, undermining broader conservation goals.

The science is not conclusive that removing waterfowl is an effective way to minimize swimmer's itch. Research findings suggest removal does not eliminate swimmer's itch unless all potential hosts are removed. Even brief presence of non-resident (migratory) birds can introduce or maintain parasite levels sufficient to cause swimmer's itch, reducing the long-term effectiveness of local brood removal.

However, there is scientific consensus that personal preventative methods (such as those listed above) are effective for people who are concerned about exposure to the swimmer's itch.

More information

[Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\) \(https://www.cdc.gov/swimmers-itich/about/index.html\)](https://www.cdc.gov/swimmers-itich/about/index.html) 



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Swimmer's Itch (Cercarial Dermatitis)

Swimmer's itch, also called cercarial dermatitis, appears as a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to certain microscopic parasites that infect some birds and mammals. These parasites are released from infected snails into fresh and salt water (such as lakes, ponds, and oceans). While the parasite's preferred host is the specific bird or mammal, if the parasite comes into contact with a swimmer, it burrows into the skin causing an allergic reaction and rash. Swimmer's itch is found throughout the world and is more frequent during summer months.

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Symptoms

Symptoms of swimmer's itch may include:

- Tingling, burning, or itching of the skin
- Small reddish pimples
- Small blisters

Within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water, you may experience tingling, burning, or itching of the skin. Small reddish pimples appear within 12 hours. Pimples may develop into small blisters. Scratching the areas may result in secondary bacterial infections. Itching may last up to a week or more, but will gradually go away.

Because swimmer's itch is caused by an allergic reaction to infection, the more often you swim or wade in contaminated water, the more likely you are to develop more serious symptoms. The greater the number of exposures to contaminated water, the more intense and immediate symptoms of swimmer's itch will be.

Be aware that swimmer's itch is not the only rash that may occur after swimming in fresh or salt water.

Treatment

Most cases of swimmer's itch do not require medical attention. If you have a rash, you may try the following for relief:

- Use corticosteroid cream
- Apply cool compresses to the affected areas
- Bathe in Epsom salts or baking soda
- Soak in colloidal oatmeal baths
- Apply baking soda paste to the rash (made by stirring water into baking soda until it reaches a paste-like consistency)
- Use an anti-itch lotion

Though difficult, try not to scratch. Scratching may cause the rash to become infected. If itching is severe, your health care provider may suggest prescription-strength lotions or creams to lessen your symptoms.

Transmission

How does water become infested with the parasite?

The adult parasite lives in the blood of infected animals such as ducks, geese, gulls, swans, and certain mammals such as muskrats and raccoons. The parasites produce eggs that are passed in the feces of infected birds or mammals.

If the eggs land in or are washed into the water, the eggs hatch, releasing small, free-swimming microscopic larvae. These larvae swim in the water in search of a certain species of aquatic snail.

If the larvae find one of these snails, they infect the snail, multiply and undergo further development. Infected snails release a different type of microscopic larvae (or cercariae, hence the name cercarial dermatitis) into the water. This larval form then swims about searching for a suitable host (bird, muskrat) to continue the lifecycle. Although humans are not suitable hosts, the microscopic larvae burrow into the swimmer's skin, and may cause an allergic reaction and rash. Because these larvae cannot develop inside a human, they soon die.

Once an outbreak of swimmer's itch has occurred in water, will the water always be unsafe?

No. Many factors must be present for swimmer's itch to become a problem in water. Since these factors change (sometimes within a swim season), swimmer's itch will not always be a problem. However, there is no way to know how long water may be unsafe. Larvae generally survive for 24 hours once they are released from the snail. However, an infected snail will continue to produce cercariae throughout the remainder of its life. For future snails to become infected, migratory birds or mammals in the area must also be infected so the lifecycle can continue.

How is swimmer's itch spread?

Anyone who swims or wades in infested water may be at risk. Larvae are more likely to be present in shallow water by the shoreline. Children are most often affected because they tend to swim, wade, and play in the shallow water more than adults. Also, they are less likely to towel dry themselves when leaving the water. Swimmer's itch is not contagious and cannot be spread from one person to another.

Prevention

To reduce the likelihood of developing swimmer's itch:

- Do not swim in areas where swimmer's itch is a known problem or where signs have been posted warning of unsafe water.
- Do not swim near or wade in marshy areas where snails are commonly found.
- Towel dry or shower immediately after leaving the water.
- Do not attract birds (e.g., by feeding them) to areas where people are swimming.

More Information

- **MNDNR: Swimmer's Itch** [[LINK http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/swimming/swimmersitch.html](http://www.dnr.state.mn.us/swimming/swimmersitch.html)]
Information from the Department of Natural Resources about swimmer's itch including information about how to apply for a permit to use copper sulfate.

Do you suspect that you have a foodborne or waterborne illness? Visit [reporting suspected foodborne/waterborne illnesses](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/foodborne/reporting.html) [[LINK http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/foodborne/reporting.html](http://www.health.state.mn.us/diseases/foodborne/reporting.html)].

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