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CONTACT:
Dan Reynolds
(231) 547-7629
d.reynolds@nwhealth.org



HEALTH
DEPARTMENT
of Northwest Michigan

www.nwhealth.org

Swimmer's itch may be unpleasant, but at least it's not dangerous

CHARLEVOIX – As the summer heats up, tourists and residents alike are flocking to Northern Michigan's lakes, ponds, and rivers. Many will spend their days swimming, splashing, fishing, and boating without consequence—but some may face the wrath of swimmer's itch.

Cercarial dermatitis, commonly known as "swimmer's itch," is a skin rash caused by parasites found in local lakes and rivers. After people swim or wade in these waters, they may become covered in itchy red bumps or blisters. The condition is caused by a reaction to microscopic parasites that are released from infected snails into the water. If the parasite comes into contact with a swimmer, it burrows into the skin.

The good news? Although it sounds unpleasant, swimmer's itch doesn't typically require medical attention, according to Joshua Meyerson, M.D., Medical Director for the Health Department.

"Swimmer's itch is common in many parts of the world," Dr. Meyerson said. "A topical hydrocortisone cream, an antihistamine like Benadryl, or cool baths with baking soda or oatmeal can help soothe the itch. It's important to avoid scratching the itchy rash, to prevent a secondary infection."

Dr. Meyerson recommends that lake swimmers towel off quickly and thoroughly after leaving the water, to minimize any possible effects. Showering upon leaving the water is also helpful. Children may need extra help with towelings and showering to avoid swimmer's itch. Dr. Meyerson adds that swimmer's itch is not contagious, and the parasites do not live in swimming pools that are properly maintained and chlorinated.

Additionally, the presence of swimmer's itch does not make a swimming area unsafe. While the Health Department monitors public beaches in Northwest Michigan for the presence of E.coli bacteria—a much more serious threat that can lead to beach closures—beaches are not closed based on reports of swimmer's itch. Results from the Health Department's beach monitoring can be found on the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Web site at www.deq.state.mi.us/beach/.

For more information about the Health Department, visit www.nwhealth.org or call (800) 432-4121. The Health Department of Northwest Michigan is mandated by the Michigan Public Health Code to promote wellness, prevent disease, provide quality healthcare, address health problems of vulnerable populations, and protect the environment for the residents and visitors of Antrim, Charlevoix, Emmet, and Otsego Counties.