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Nutria Itch

Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries

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Dave Soileau, supervisor of Atchafalaya Delta Wildlife Management Area for the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries, received a frantic phone call from a Lafayette man infected with nutria itch. The man suspected that the infection was contracted during a recent waterfowl hunt at Wax Lake Outlet in St. Mary Parish and was frantic because of an unbearably itchy rash.

The ailment is named for its prevalent symptom and likely origin-nutria feces. Nutria itch is caused by a parasite suspected to be the larvae of *Strongyloides*, a nematode. The larvae travels from the nutria (and sometimes raccoon) excrement via water and burrows under the skin of an unwitting human. The new host experiences the itching and rash caused by the parasite within minutes and continues to suffer the ill effects for seven to ten days.

"Nutria itch is extremely pruritic (itchy) and is treated symptomatically with antihistamines and intramuscular or topical steroids," said Baton Rouge dermatologist Meggie Dobson Collier. "The organism is not dangerous in the long run, unless one scratches affected areas raw and contracts a secondary infection. *Strongyloides* larvae die within seven to ten days of infecting a host and the itchy rash disappears."

Almost all reported cases of nutria itch occur during Louisiana's warm months such as those preceding duck and deer hunting season. Louisiana's trappers, hunters and fishermen are all candidates for nutria itch infection. It is important to take a few precautions against the itch.

While enjoying the great outdoors, make every effort to stay dry particularly in stagnant, plant-laden coastal waters. Boots, hip boots and chest waders should be checked for holes and used even when it's hot. One should shower immediately after exposure, suspected or otherwise, to infested water which will not necessarily prevent the rash, but may greatly reduce the itchiness. If the ailment is contracted despite precautions, a physician should be consulted for treatment of the symptoms; many unfortunate people have reported an itching so fierce that sleep was not possible and antihistamines or pain relievers were not very effective.

The gentleman from Lafayette learned that coastal marsh areas like Wax Lake Outlet can harbor some unfriendly organisms and will more likely wear chest waders in the future. All those who find themselves in coastal marshes should remember that while traveling through animal habitats, precautions are necessary.

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From an on-line dictionary

Swamp itch. (Med.) See Prairie itch, under Prairie.

Prairie itch (Med.), an affection of the skin attended with intense itching, which is observed in the Northern and Western United States; -- also called swamp itch, winter itch.

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