

Underwater Irritations for Swimmers and Divers

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The Atlantic side of the Keys, and especially the reefs, seem to be good environments for the barely visible larvae of the sea thimble jellyfish (*Linuche unguiculata*). These larvae are the culprits that cause the common underwater malady called “Sea Bather’s Eruption.”

Sea thimbles are small tropical jellyfish that, even as adults, get no larger than about a half-inch in size.

Sea Bather’s Eruption usually starts with a stinging, itchy sensation and a rash or cluster of rashes forming on the swimmers, snorkelers, or divers skin soon after getting out of the water.

The old-time locals call this malady "Pica-Pica" (Spanish for "Itchy-Itchy"). This affliction is quite scary to newcomers who are not familiar with it and can be downright aggravating to the rest of us. The rash, itchiness, and other symptoms are caused by the body’s allergic reaction to the toxin injected into the skin by the tiny stinging cells or nematocysts of the larval jellyfish.

Typically the symptoms of red rash-like bumps occur on areas of the body where clothing was constricted. Some people later develop more severe allergic reactions of nausea, fever, chills, and headaches. You should see a doctor if you get a severe reaction. Each person may react differently to the stings depending on their sensitivity and previous exposure.

The stinging is thought to occur as the larvae become trapped beneath the bathing suit, wet suit, or other clothing and they later release their stinging cells when agitated by the friction of clothing by drying out or by being rinsed with fresh water.

Amazingly, you can also be stung days or weeks later after washing and drying the infested clothing. The stinging cells are not actually alive and can persist until a particular physical or chemical reaction stimulates them to fire the stinger that contains the toxin.

What can you do to prevent Sea Bather's Eruption? Other than stay out of the water which is impractical to most of us, not much can be done to completely avoid this jellyfish’s sting since you cannot see them. People have tried various body salves to prevent the larvae from getting to the skin,

but salves do not provide a strong enough barrier to the stingers. Sometimes a wet suit will limit the infestation to the edges of the garment. My personal experience indicates the infestation seems to occur primarily near the surface of the water so snorkelers and swimmers seem to be the most vulnerable.

If you think you are a victim of Sea Bather's Eruption, preventive measures can be taken to remove the unfired stinging cells from your body immediately upon getting out of the water. The most effective preventive measure would be a full body rinse of seawater taken from an area without the sea thimble present (for example, dockside) followed by pat-drying with a towel and a change of clothes. Do not rub the affected areas with towels or hands as that could cause additional stinging. Caution: An immediate rinse with fresh water, vinegar, or other solutions may actually cause additional stinging from larvae clinging to your skin or clothes.

However, once you know you have been stung and you have done whatever you can to prevent additional stings from clinging jellyfish or nematocysts, you can try a number of treatments. After the saltwater rinse and pat-drying, a vinegar or ammonia rinse (diluted with freshwater or jellyfish-free seawater) will help to neutralize any toxin left on the skin. Meat tenderizer or wet baking soda applied to the skin at this point may also help neutralize remaining toxins. An ice pack will help to relieve any pain that may occur. Non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs such as ibuprofen and aspirin also will help reduce pain and inflammation.

The best long-term treatment is an application of a topical anti-itch ointment with cortisone or an oral antihistamine to reduce the body's allergic reaction to the toxin. The same treatment will not work equally well for everyone. The itching usually lasts from 2-4 days but can sometimes last longer. Severe reactions may require treatment, usually cortisone shots, from a physician.

Little else is known about this problem. Although most people refer to this as a Sea Lice infestation, Sea Bather's Eruption is distinct and different from the Sea Lice infestations that occur in more northern waters. Sea Lice infestations are caused by flatworm larvae trying to burrow into a

swimmers skin and are usually on exposed skin whereas Sea Bather's Eruption is typically found on areas covered by clothing.