



Recreational Water Illnesses

What are recreational water illnesses?

Recreational water illnesses (RWI) are a group of diseases that can be caused by swimming in bodies of water (pools, oceans, lakes, rivers, ponds) that are contaminated with many different germs.

What is the most common cause of recreational water illness?

Diarrhea is the most common RWI. Swimmers who are sick with diarrhea—or who have been sick in the last two weeks—risk contaminating pool water with germs. Certain germs that cause diarrhea can live from minutes to days in pools, even if the pool is kept clean and disinfected. Infectious diarrhea can contain anywhere from hundreds of millions to one billion germs per bowel movement. Swallowing even a tiny bit of water that has been contaminated with these germs can make you sick. Tiny amounts of fecal matter are rinsed off all swimmers' bottoms as they swim through the water. That is why it is important to stay out of the pool if you are sick with diarrhea.

What are other causes of recreational water illnesses?

Many other RWI (skin, ear, eye, respiratory, neurologic, wound, and other infections) are caused by germs that live naturally in the environment (for example, in water and soil). If disinfectant levels in pools or hot tubs are not appropriately maintained, these germs can multiply and cause illness when swimmers breathe in mists or aerosols of or have contact with the contaminated water.

Oceans, lakes, and rivers can also be contaminated with germs from sewage spills, animal wastes, water runoff following a heavy rainfall, fecal incidents, and germs rinsed off the bottoms of swimmers. Since natural recreational water cannot be disinfected properly, it is very important to avoid swallowing the water.

How can I avoid getting a recreational water illness?

Here are a few tips on what to look for before you go swimming to help you avoid a RWI:

Before you go into the water at the beach or lake:

- Avoid swimming after a heavy rain
- Beware of storm drains (pipes that drain polluted water); do not swim near them.
- Look out for trash and other signs of pollution such as oil slicks in the water; this may indicate the presence of disease-causing germs that may have washed into the water.

Things you should notice around the pool:

- **Clean and clear pool water.** You should be able to clearly see the bottom of the pool.
- **Smooth pool sides.** Tiles should not be sticky or slippery.
- **No odor.** A well-chlorinated pool has little odor. A strong chemical smell indicates a maintenance problem.
- **Pool equipment working.** Pool pumps and filtration systems make noise and you should hear them running.

REMEMBER: Practice healthy swimming behaviors:

- Do NOT swim when you have diarrhea.
- Do not swallow water or get water from pools, lakes, rivers, and oceans in your mouth.
- Shower before swimming.
- Wash your hands after using the toilet or changing diapers.
- Take children on bathroom breaks or check diapers often.
- Change diapers in the bathroom and not at poolside and thoroughly clean the diaper changing area.

Additional Resources:

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Swimmer Protection. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/protection/index.html>.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Recreational water illnesses: Information for the public. <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/audience-general-public.html>.