



N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources

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North Carolina Joins Other States To Observe National Recreational Water Illness Prevention Week

RALEIGH — North Carolina health officials are asking people to take certain precautions if they go swimming this spring or summer so they don't get sick or make others sick.

The reminder from the state's divisions of Environmental Health and Public Health comes as part of national Recreational Water Illness Prevention Week, which is May 18-24.

"Awareness of recreational water illnesses and healthy swimming behaviors play an important role in stopping the transmission of these illnesses," said Terry L. Pierce, director of the N.C. Division of Environmental Health. "In addition to infectious agents from animals, which may cause human illness, infectious agents on and in swimmers' bodies can end up in the water and make other people sick."

Although healthy swimmers can get sick from recreational water illnesses, or RWIs, the young and elderly, and persons with weakened immune systems, as well as pregnant women and diabetics, are especially at risk.

To avoid water-borne illnesses, follow these simple guidelines, Pierce said:

1. Do not swim or allow children to swim if you or they have diarrhea.
2. Do not swallow pool water or get pool water in your mouth.
3. Shower before swimming.
4. Wash your hands after using the toilet or changing diapers.
5. Place tight-fitting swim diapers on children. Check diapers before entering the water.
6. Take children on bathroom breaks.
7. Change childrens' diapers often and in a bathroom, not at the poolside.

Pierce also highlighted the importance of this year's theme, which focuses on injuries associated with pool chemicals.

"Pool chemicals make the water where you swim safer by protecting us from germs," Pierce said. "However, these same chemicals can also cause injuries if they are not properly handled. This type of preventable injury leads to numerous emergency room visits each year."

Public pool operators and residential pool owners can protect themselves and swimmers by taking the following steps:

- Secure pool chemicals. Keep children and animals away.
- Read the product's name and manufacturer's directions before each use.
- Use appropriate protective gear, such as safety glasses and gloves, when handling pool chemicals.
- Never mix chlorine products with each other, acid or other substances.

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Following simple health guidelines such as good hygiene can help protect swimmers from a variety of infectious illnesses.

North Carolina health officials and local health departments have investigated numerous cases of recreational water illnesses caused by Cryptosporidium, a chlorine-resistant parasite primarily associated with treated recreational water venues such as pools and water parks. It also can be found in natural bodies of water, soil, food or on surfaces that have been contaminated with infected human or animal feces.

In North Carolina, 79 cases of cryptosporidiosis were reported in 2008. Although cryptosporidiosis usually causes only mild gastroenteritis in healthy persons, it may cause serious illness in those with compromised immune systems. This parasite is able to survive and remain infectious for long periods of time, even in well-maintained pools.

Marine vibrios can also cause illness in people who swim in recreational waters. Vibrios are naturally-occurring bacteria found in warm ocean and coastal waters such as bays, estuaries and rivers near the ocean. Although the risk of infection is low, once it occurs people must be diagnosed early and treated appropriately. People who have liver disease, diabetes or are immuno-compromised are particularly at risk for infection and death from this disease.

People may become infected by *Vibrio vulnificus* and other marine vibrios through injuries such as a puncture or laceration from finfish or shellfish or exposure of open wounds to coastal waters. Symptoms of infected wounds include pain, swelling and redness that may quickly spread or blister.

Water contamination by sewage or stormwater runoff also can cause problems. People also have an increased risk of becoming sick from swimming in natural waters in coastal and inland areas, especially in areas downstream from sewage treatment facilities and in all areas after storm events. Storm events are associated with increased runoff from cities as well as forests, farms and pasture lands, which can be sources of Cryptosporidium, fecal bacteria and viruses known to cause human illness.

“Summer and swimming go hand-in-hand in North Carolina,” said Pierce. “And healthy swimming behaviors will go a long way in preventing water-borne illnesses. To make this summer a healthy swimming experience, swimmers are urged to adopt healthy swimming behaviors to reduce the risk of recreational water illnesses while enjoying North Carolina’s recreational water venues.”

For more information about Recreational Water Illness Prevention Week and healthy swimming, visit the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s Web site at: www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming. For North Carolina specific information, visit www.deh.enr.state.nc.us/ehs/pti_healthyswimming.htm, or contact the N.C. Division of Environmental Health at (919) 733-2884.

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