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Show Me Health

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Healthy Swimming

Hot weather and high gas prices may make the local swimming pools especially attractive this summer. But, before you jump in the water, there are a few things to remember. Because swimming is the second most popular form of exercise in the United States, the Centers for Disease Control asks that everyone practice healthy swimming to prevent recreational water illnesses.

These types of illnesses are spread in contaminated water that you swallow, breath or come in contact with in any way. Recreational water illnesses can cause gastrointestinal, skin, ear, respiratory, eye, wound, and neurologic infections. The most common reported illness is diarrhea. There are several germs that can cause diarrheal illness, including Cryptosporidium, Giardia, Shigella, norovirus and E coli 0157:H7.

Cryptosporidium, or crypto, is a parasite that lives in the intestine of infected human or animals. Infected fecal matter that moves out of the gut then contaminates whatever surface it contacts. So this parasite can be found in the soil, in water, on food or surfaces you may touch. The parasite must be swallowed, so that big drink of pool water could be a problem. Crypto is a hardy germ that can survive for days in a pool, even though chlorine levels are adequate.

Symptoms of crypto are gastrointestinal related, with watery diarrhea the most common. This diarrhea is so severe it generally leads to dehydration and weight loss, in addition to stomach cramping and pain, fever, nausea and vomiting. Symptoms last about 2 weeks in healthy persons. It can be a very serious illness in young children, pregnant women or anyone who is immune suppressed. Once the symptoms are resolved, patients continue to shed the parasite in their stools for several weeks, thus the potential to spread the disease continues.

These illnesses don't just happen in big cities with huge water parks-they can spread from a backyard swimming pool just as easily. In the past, the Health Center

investigated a crypto outbreak that broke out during the summer and eventually involved 13 people in the county. Some of those who were ill had been in local pools. The Livingston County Health Center environmental sanitarian alerted all of our community pools and worked with their staff to prevent the spread of this very contagious illness. Crypto is no fun to deal with, often exhibiting severe gas pains and spastic diarrhea and often lasts weeks.

Giardia is another parasite found in contaminated water that causes diarrheal illness. It causes mild to severe diarrhea, cramps, bloating and gas. It can last a few weeks to months and be shed in the stool for long periods. Giardia is more commonly thought to be in lakes, reservoirs and streams that are the habitat of beaver. But human fecal waste can also be a source of contamination.

These are only two of the causes of recreational water illnesses. But the point is that we all share the water. So how can we maintain health and still have fun?

The Centers for Disease Control suggests we practice Healthy Swimming, a list of tips to prevent the spread of communicable disease through water. The tips use common sense and encourage practicing courtesy to others.

- Don't swim when you have diarrhea.
- Don't swallow pool water or even get it in your mouth if at all possible.
- Take a shower before swimming.
- Wash your hands after using the toilet or changing a diaper.
- Remember that little kids need bathroom breaks often. Diapers need to be changed often, in the bathroom, not pool-side. Scrub those little bottoms before returning them to the pool.

If you and your fellow-swimmers practice these hygiene tips, the pool should be clean and clear. You should be able to clearly see the bottom of the pool and any markings there. The sides of the pool should be smooth, not slippery. There shouldn't be a strong chlorine odor.

Recreational water illnesses can ruin your whole summer. Whether you keep cool in the pool or swim with the fishes, practice Healthy Swimming for a healthy summer!

The health center is an equal opportunity provider.