

Recreational Water Illness

Swimming is one of the most popular activities in the country - especially during these hot summer days. We often assume that because swimming pools are treated with chemicals they are completely safe. But is that really true? UT Health Center's Dr. Mom has more.

Choose to Swim Healthy!

In these dog days of summer, swimming pools will be filled with millions of people having fun and staying cool. But did you know that germs can contaminate swimming water even if it is treated with chlorine? Recreational water illnesses (RWIs) are spread by swimming in contaminated recreational waters such as swimming pools, water parks, lakes, and the ocean.

RWIs are caused by germs like "Crypto" (KRIP-toe, short for Cryptosporidium), Giardia (gee-ARE-dee-uh), E. coli O157:H7, and Shigella (Shi-GE-luh) and are spread by accidentally swallowing water that has been contaminated with fecal matter. How does a pool get contaminated? You share the water with everyone in the pool. If someone with diarrhea contaminates the water, swallowing the water can make you sick.

The great news is that germs causing recreational water illnesses (RWIs) are killed by chlorine. However, chlorine doesn't work right away. It takes time to kill germs and some germs can live in pools for days. Some germs like Crypto can live for several days in the best-maintained pool. Chlorine does kill all germs, it just takes time.

Healthy swimming behaviors that will protect you and your kids from recreational water illnesses and stop germs from getting in the pool in the first place are:

For all swimmers:

- Please don't swim when you have diarrhea. This is especially important for kids in diapers. You can spread germs in the water and make other people sick.
- Please don't swallow the pool water. In fact, avoid getting water in your mouth.
- Please practice good hygiene. Take a shower before swimming and wash your hands after using the toilet or changing diapers. Germs on your body end up in the water.

For Parents of young kids:

- Please take your kids on bathroom breaks or check diapers often. Waiting to hear "I have to go" may mean that it's too late.
- Please change diapers in a bathroom and not at poolside. Germs can spread to surfaces and objects in and around the pool and spread illness. Always use "swim diapers" for babies and toddlers.
- Please wash your child thoroughly (especially the rear end) with soap and water before swimming. Everyone has invisible amounts of fecal matter on their bottoms that ends up in the pool.