



NEWS RELEASE
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Experts Warn of Chlorine-resistant Crypto *Health officials urge swimmers to help stop the spread of RWIs*

(Salt Lake County) –Over 1,000 licensed swimming pools in Salt Lake County were open for business last weekend – nearly a million gallons crystal-clear water filled with thousands of people having fun and keeping cool. However, with recreational water illnesses (RWIs) on the rise nationally, the Salt Lake Valley Health Department (SLVHD) is urging swimmers to be vigilant about healthy swimming behaviors that will protect oneself, one's family, and fellow swimmers from the spread of RWIs this summer.

In a national report issued last week, the Centers For Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) acknowledged they are seeing a steady increase nationwide in RWI outbreaks – with 19,000 cases reported between 1985 and 2002 – an increase the agency says is due to more recreational water usage, better illness detection, and increased disease transmission.

There is no doubt that contaminated recreational water is a nationwide problem, but how can you tell if the water is clean and safe?

It's not easy, says SLVHD Water Quality Supervisor, Teresa Gray. Even clear, sparkling pools can harbor bacteria. And a strong chlorine smell often followed by stinging eyes and coughing, doesn't necessarily mean swimmers are safe. "That is a noxious byproduct of chlorine binding to organic matter such as sunscreen, sweat, and 'accidents' like urine or poop," Gray explained. "Well-maintained water should be odorless and irritation-free."

Pools and other recreational water facilities can harbor bacteria, viruses and parasites -- the most common being E. coli, giardia, cryptosporidium, shigella and hepatitis A -- that cause diarrhea, skin rashes and ear, eye or respiratory infections.

Cases of cryptosporidium, a parasite that causes diarrhea, increase five-fold in the summertime and are responsible for about 60 percent of all RWI outbreaks. And, while chlorine takes care of most germs in less than an hour, cryptosporidium can live for days even in the most stringently maintained swimming facilities.

"A lot of people think pool water is sterile, but it's really more like communal bath water," Gray said. Most people don't think to blame recreational water when they become sick. "When someone becomes ill with diarrhea, they think about what they ate last night, not where they swam last week," she said.

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However, most pool contamination can be traced to a single source: poop, either solid or in the form of diarrhea, which is nearly undetectable.

Under Salt Lake County health regulations, pools, spas and other water facilities are required to close immediately when feces are found for anywhere from 19 minutes to 8 hours to allow heavy chlorination and water recirculation to sweep away the germs. They are also required to keep a record of when it was found and the steps they took to treat the fecal accident.

Chlorine is the main line of defense against the spread of germs. It works by oxidizing microorganisms and bacteria and rendering them harmless. Meanwhile, recirculation equipment, such as flow meters and pumps, keeps the water clear, and filters, gutters and skimmers clean out debris.

But as more and more people jump into the pool -- particularly on hot days -- the water becomes less acidic, as measured by pH tests, and the chlorine loses effectiveness. Sweat, sunscreen, urine and soap accumulate, using up chlorine that should be fighting germs.

“In 2005, an outbreak of ‘Crypto’ (cryptosporidiosis) affected almost 3,800 people in New York,” explained Gray. “Not to say that we don’t encounter our fair share of problems but, Salt Lake County has not experienced a waterborne illness outbreak for several years.” Last year, SLVHD pool inspectors temporarily closed 81 pools (about 8 %) due to a public health risk which is down from previous years.

While even healthy swimmers can get sick from RWIs, the young, elderly, pregnant women and immuno-suppressed persons are especially at risk. To help ensure a healthy swimming experience for yourself, your family and others, SLVHD offers the following tips:

1. Do not swim when you have diarrhea.
2. Do not swallow pool water or get pool water in your mouth.
3. Shower before swimming (children too!).
4. Wash your hands after using the toilet or changing diapers.
5. Take children on bathroom breaks or change diapers often.
6. Change children’s diapers in a bathroom, not at poolside.

For more information on Recreational Water Illness, visit www.slvhealth.org or call (801) 313-6700.

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