

Waterborne Illnesses

Can I catch a disease from swimming?

Swimming is usually a safe and healthy activity. It is possible to get sick from water that has germs in it by swallowing it or getting it in a cut. You can get infections from swimming pools, too, even if the water has been treated with chlorine. There are bacteria, viruses, and parasites in pools that can survive in treated water.

What kind of diseases can I catch?

Most people who get sick from swimming have diarrhea. It usually gets better on its own. It is also possible to catch pneumonia and bad skin infections from contaminated water.

When should I see my doctor?

Talk to your doctor if you have bloody diarrhea, diarrhea that lasts more than a week, or a cough with fever. See your doctor right away if you have more serious symptoms, such as fever and a stiff neck after swimming in a freshwater pond, or a bad skin infection with fever. Be sure to tell your doctor that you've been in the water.

How can I keep from getting sick?

- Don't swallow water while in pools, hot tubs, fountains, lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, streams, or the ocean.

- Don't drink untreated water from lakes, rivers, springs, ponds, streams, or shallow wells.
- Pay attention to all warnings and posted signs about swimming and other water-based activities.

How can I help keep others from getting sick?

- Don't go in the water if you have or are just getting over diarrhea. This is most important for children in diapers.
- If you had an infection called giardiasis, do not swim for at least a week after diarrhea stops.
- Shower before entering the water.
- Wash children thoroughly (especially their bottoms) with soap and water after they use the bathroom or after their diapers are changed.
- Take children on frequent bathroom breaks and check their diapers often.
- Change diapers in the bathroom, not by the water.

Where can I get more information?

Your doctor

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
<http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/swimmers/rwi.html> and <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/residential/disinfection-testing.html>

May 2017

This handout is provided to you by your family doctor and the American Academy of Family Physicians. Other health-related information is available from the AAFP online at <http://familydoctor.org>.

This information provides a general overview and may not apply to everyone. Talk to your family doctor to find out if this information applies to you and to get more information on this subject. Copyright © 2017 American Academy of Family Physicians. Individuals may photocopy this material for their own personal reference, and physicians may photocopy for use with their own patients. Written permission is required for all other uses, including electronic uses.



AMERICAN ACADEMY OF
FAMILY PHYSICIANS