

# Recreation Water Illnesses (RWI) Fact Sheet



## What are Recreational Water Illnesses?

Recreational Water Illnesses (RWI) are illnesses that are spread by germs that can contaminate water in any recreational water source including swimming pools, water parks, hot tubs, spas, lakes, rivers, ponds and the ocean. RWIs can be a wide variety of infections, including gastrointestinal, skin, ear, respiratory, eye, neurologic and wound infections. The most common illness is diarrhea.

## What causes RWI's?

Diarrheal RWI's are caused by germs like "Crypto" (KRIP-toe, short for Cryptosporidium), Giardia (gee-ARE-dee-uh), E. coli, norovirus, and Shigella (Shi-GE-luh).

## How will I know if I have it?

RWI's can cause many symptoms, most common is diarrhea. Persons with a weakened immune system, children, and pregnant women may be at greater risk for more severe illness. See your health care provider if you feel sick after swimming.

## How is RWI treated?

See your health care provider if you feel ill after swimming. Most people will get better without any medicine, but only your doctor can decide what is best for you.

## How are RWI's spread in swimming pools?

The germs that cause RWI are spread by accidentally swallowing water that has been contaminated with fecal material. If someone with diarrhea contaminates the water, swallowing the water can make you sick. It only takes a very small amount of feces that rinses off in the pool to infect the water. Do not swim if you have diarrhea. To be sure that most germs are killed, chlorine or other disinfectant levels and pH should be checked on a regular basis as part of good pool operation. Chlorine kills most germs in less than an hour, but others (like crypto) require longer time.

## How are RWI's spread in lakes, rivers, and oceans?

Lakes, rivers, and oceans can become contaminated with germs from sewage, animal waste, water run off following rainfall, fecal accidents, and germs rinsed off the bottoms of swimmers. Do not swim after rainfalls or in areas that have been identified as unsafe by Maine Healthy Beaches Program or other state agencies.

## How can I prevent RWI?

The best way to prevent RWI is to practice good hygiene and to avoid water that might be infected with germs. Practicing these healthy swimming behaviors will prevent illness:

- Don't swim when you have diarrhea.
- Don't swallow water and avoid getting water in your mouth
- Shower with soap before swimming and wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet or changing diapers.
- Take your kids on bathroom breaks or check diapers often.
- Change diapers in a bathroom or a diaper-changing area and not at poolside.
- Wash your children thoroughly (especially the rear end) with soap and water before they go swimming.

## Where can I get more information?

For more information contact your healthcare provider. You can also contact the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention by calling 1-800-821-5821 or visiting <http://www.maine.gov/idepi>. Information from the federal CDC is available at [www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming](http://www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming).

For information on beaches, please visit <http://www.mainehealthybeaches.org> or <https://www.epa.gov/beaches>.