



LEWIS & CLARK CITY-COUNTY  
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**For IR Public Health Column**

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## **Water: It Gives Health But Also Can Take It Away**

**By Melanie Reynolds  
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Water has been called the elixir of life. It's essential to the existence of every creature on earth.

Our bodies are made up of about 60 percent water. It's in every cell, tissue, and organ. That's why getting enough water every day is so important for our health.

Good old H<sub>2</sub>O helps keep our body temperature stable, lubricates and cushions our joints and sensitive tissues, moves nutrients around our body, and helps our body get rid of waste.

Most of the time we can meet our daily need for water by drinking it with meals and whenever we feel thirsty. But if you're going to be outside in hot weather for most of the day or doing vigorous physical activity, you'll need to try to drink more.

### **Adding Water to Diet**

If you think you're not getting enough water, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have some tips that may help:

- Carry a water bottle when you're at work or running errands.
- Freeze some freezer-safe water bottles. Take one with you for ice-cold water all day long.
- Choose water instead of sugar-sweetened beverages, like soda and fruit drinks. This can also help you manage your weight. By substituting water for one 20-ounce, sugar-sweetened soda, you save about 240 calories.
- Choose water instead of other beverages when eating out. Generally, you'll save money and reduce calories.
- Give your water a little pizzazz by adding a wedge of lime or lemon. This may improve the taste and encourage you to drink more than you usually do.

To learn more about water and your diet, visit the CDC website at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/drinking/nutrition/index.html>

## Swimming in Germs

In addition to its dietary benefits, water also can be an ingredient of a healthy lifestyle. The Helena area is blessed with swimming pools and nearby rivers and reservoirs for recreational activities. What summer is complete without a day of swimming or water skiing?

But while water may promote health, it also can transmit disease -- unless we take steps to prevent it.

Recreational water illnesses (RWIs) are caused by germs and chemicals that contaminate water in swimming pools, hot tubs, fountains, lakes, rivers, and oceans. We can become infected if we swallow this water, or if we breathe in droplets or have contact with it. The germs and chemicals can affect our skin, ears, eyes, lungs, stomach, and intestines. They also can infect existing wounds.

Some of the most common culprits for RWIs are *Cryptosporidium* (commonly called Crypto), *Giardia*, *Shigella*, norovirus, and *E. coli*.

## Protection at the Pool

In the past two decades, there's been a big increase in the number of RWI outbreaks associated with swimming, according to the CDC.

So if your summer plans include lots of quality time in a bathing suit, you may want to follow these easy and effective tips:

- Don't swim if you have diarrhea, and don't let your child do so, either.
- Shower with soap before you start swimming.
- Take bathroom breaks every 60 minutes (remind the kids, too).
- If you have young children, check their diapers every 30–60 minutes. Change them in the bathroom or diaper-changing area and not at poolside, where germs can rinse into the water.
- Wash your hands after using the toilet or changing diapers.
- Never swallow the water you swim in.

For more tips on safe and healthy swimming, visit

<http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/protection/index.html>

Fortunately, sanitarians with the Lewis and Clark City-County Health Department regularly inspect public pools, spas, and hot tubs for cleanliness. They have the authority to close a pool or spa if it doesn't meet state health requirements.

Because of these regulations, it's much safer to swim in a well-managed pool than in a natural body of water, especially for children.

The health department recently awarded certificates to seven local pools and spas for their efforts to protect public health and safety. You can find a list of them at [www.lewisandclarkhealth.org](http://www.lewisandclarkhealth.org)

## Water in the Wild

When we recreate near lakes, rivers, and creeks, we need to remember that these are not inspected or disinfected. Drinking from or swimming in them can be risky.

Lakes and rivers can be contaminated with germs from sewage spills, animal waste, rain runoff, and germs rinsed off the bottoms of swimmers. The water may look clean and clear, but that doesn't mean it isn't tainted. So don't swallow the water. Be sure to avoid swimming immediately after rainfalls or in areas posted as unsafe.

You can learn more about recreational water illnesses at <http://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/rwi/>

Water is arguably the most precious resource on our planet. Just remember that it can also be swimming with threats to your health. Play it safe!