



For IR Public Health column

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Just Look What the Heat Dragged In!

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Ah, the long, balmy days of summer! Who doesn't love hanging out at the pool, presiding over the barbie, or camping under the stars? After enduring a Montana winter, we deserve to bask in the heat!

But we humans aren't the only ones who thrive in warm temperatures. Bacteria and other germs that can cause disease also tend to flourish, and they threaten our enjoyment of the season.

Fortunately, there are plenty of ways to reduce the risk that these ickies will ruin our summer fun.

In the Water

Swimming is a great way to get exercise, but germs and chemicals found in the water – whether a pool, spa, water park, lake, or river – can cause recreational water illnesses (RWIs). Knowing the basic facts about RWIs can make the difference between a having good time and getting a rash, diarrhea, or some other misery.

Contaminated water can cause various infections affecting stomach, skin, ear, lungs, eyes, or wounds. The most common RWI is diarrhea. Swallowing even a small amount of water that's been contaminated with feces can cause it.

Operators of well-maintained pools and spas use chlorine or other disinfectants to stop the spread of germs in the water. They also monitor PH levels, which can affect germ growth.

Sanitarians at Lewis and Clark Public Health inspect local public pools and spas to ensure that they're maintained properly to protect health. You can ask to see proof of inspection when you visit your favorite swimming pool or spa, or call the health department at 457-8900.

Unfortunately, the chlorine used to kill germs can also cause problems, by combining with stuff that comes out of or off of swimmers' bodies. The result can be an irritant called chloramine, which can cause skin rashes and breathing problems. If you smell "chlorine" at the place you swim, you're probably smelling chloramines. They're particularly a problem in indoor pools where there's less ventilation. Healthy pools don't have a strong chemical smell.

Of course, oceans, lakes, and rivers can also be contaminated – by sewage spills, animal waste, water runoff, and germs rinsed off the bottoms of swimmers. And natural recreational water isn't disinfected, so don't swallow it. Also avoid swimming right after it rains or in areas posted as unsafe or unhealthy.

More tips to help protect against RWIs:

- Stay out of the water if you've had diarrhea recently.
- Stay out of the water if you have an open wound that's not covered with a waterproof bandage.
- Shower before you get in the water. It takes only a minute to rinse off adequately.
- Don't poop or pee in the water.
- Don't swallow the water you're swimming in.
- Take kids on bathroom breaks.
- Check kids' diapers at least once an hour. Change them in a bathroom or diaper-changing area – not poolside – to keep germs away from the pool. Wash your hands afterwards.
- If your child has an accident in a public pool, alert staff so they can clean the water.
- Dry your ears with a towel to prevent ear infection.

For more information: www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/swimmers/rwi.html

At the Picnic or BBQ

What's a Montana summer without picnics and barbecues? But food and summer temperatures can be a dangerous mix. Bacteria multiply rapidly between 40 and 140 degrees, so safe food handling is critical.

Basically, you need to keep hot food hot and cold food cold. Avoid cross contamination between meats and other foods. That can be hard when you have to pack and transport food. Here are some tips to help:

- Before you pack fruits and vegetables in a cooler, clean them in running tap water and dry with a paper towel.
- Store cold food at 40 degrees Fahrenheit or less to prevent bacterial growth. Pack food on all sides with ice or frozen gel packs, and limit the number of times you open the cooler.
- Never let perishable food sit out longer than two hours (or one hour if the temperature is above 90 degrees). If it does, throw it out.
- Make sure hands, utensils, serving dishes, and all surfaces are clean while preparing and serving food. If you won't have access to running water, pack a water jug, soap, and paper towels. Or use moist disposable towelettes.
- Never reuse a plate or utensil that held raw meat or seafood unless you've washed it first in hot, soapy water. This is especially important when serving cooked food from the grill.
- Grill food thoroughly. Use a food thermometer to check that it's really done.
- If you marinate meat before grilling, don't reuse the marinade. If you want to use it as a sauce, reserve some separately.

For more information: www.fda.gov/Food/ResourcesForYou/Consumers/ucm109899

On a Camping Trip

Many of these precautions also apply if you're camping or backpacking. But given our love of visiting Montana's seemingly pristine streams and lakes, it's worth sharing a few last words about a particularly pesky parasite.

Giardia lurks in soil, food, or water that's been contaminated with poop from infected people or animals. It causes an intestinal illness known as giardiasis, a polite way of describing 2-6 weeks of stomach cramps, diarrhea, nausea, and gas. Drinking from streams and lakes – no matter how clean they look – is a common way to catch giardiasis.

So if you're venturing into the great outdoors and you won't be able to carry enough drinking water – or if the campground you've chosen has no safe drinking water – this tip is for you.

Purify your water before drinking, cooking, washing, or brushing your teeth with it. Use one of these methods:

- Bring the water to a rolling boil and let it bubble for 1 minute (3 minutes if you're above 6,500 feet). Allow to cool.
- Add a chemical disinfectant to the water. You can find several different kinds in drugstores or camping supply stores. Follow the instructions on the package closely. You may need to wait several hours until all germs are killed.
- Use a commercial filter designed especially for treating water. A variety of filters are available at camping stores. Make sure the one you choose specifically says it protects against *Giardia*.

For more information: www.cdc.gov/parasites/giardia/

Montana summers are far too glorious to let some gross little germ hijack your enjoyment!