

Make a splash without getting sick this summer

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FIRST Jaws kept millions out of the water, and now some experts fear that the rapid increase of recreational water illnesses (RWI) may do the same thing. And they caution that with the soaring rates of childhood obesity, anything that prevents kids from getting regular exercise -- including swimming -- may do more harm than good.

RWI refers to any illness or infection caused by organisms that contaminate water in pools, lakes, hot tubs, and oceans, resulting in diarrhoea, skin rashes, swimmer's ear, and other conditions. And they are on the rise.

"No one who swims is safe from RWIs," says Alan Greene, MD, an assistant clinical professor of paediatrics at Stanford University in Stanford, California, and author of several books including *From First Kicks to First Steps*.

In the summer of 1975, Jaws had beachgoers heeding the advice of the movie's tagline, "Don't go in the water." But unlike great white sharks that may lurk below the ocean's surface, simple prevention methods as well as quick treatment can help keep RWIs at bay -- where they belong, Greene says. "Not swallowing water and drying your ears can reduce the great majority of RWIs," he says.

As with most things, the best defence is a good offence.

Know Thy Enemy

Infection-producing germs that can lurk in water include *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*, which causes swimmer's ear (an infection of the outer ear canal, known medically as otitis externa) and skin rash (dermatitis). Others include *cryptosporidium*, *Giardia lamblia*, *shigella*, and *E. coli*, which can cause diarrhoea. "You can catch respiratory illnesses and colds but by far, skin rashes, swimmer's ear, and gastrointestinal bugs are the most common," he says.

Diarrhoea may occur when contaminated water is swallowed and driven into the mouth or nose, Greene explains. It may not begin immediately after a swim; sometimes it comes on one to two weeks later.



"Swimmer's ear is easier to get," he says. "Excessive water in the ear canal breaks down the protective barriers in the ear and allows bacteria to get into the ear," he explains.

It is marked by one to two days of progressive ear pain that is worsened by chewing or when the ear is being pulled. Itching, pus, and discharge often follow.

Swimmer's itch, also called cercarial dermatitis, is marked by tingling, burning, or itching of the skin,

small reddish pimples, and/or small blisters that appear within minutes to days after swimming in contaminated water. This skin rash is primarily caused by exposure to parasites or their larvae in fresh and salt water. Hot tub rash, or dermatitis, is an infection of the skin in which the skin may become itchy and progress to a bumpy, red rash that may become tender. There may also be pus-filled blisters that are usually found surrounding hair follicles. The rash is usually caused by the bacteria *Pseudomonas aeruginosa*. It usually occurs within a few days of swimming in poorly maintained hot tubs or spas, but it can also be spread by swimming in a contaminated pool or lake.

An Ounce of Prevention...

Many people say that adding chlorine to a pool can kill all potentially disease-causing germs, and that's true -- to a degree. Chlorine in properly disinfected pools kills most germs that can cause RWIs in less than an hour, but it takes longer to kill some germs, such as cryptosporidium, which can survive for days in even a properly disinfected pool.

"The best way to prevent diarrhoea is not to swallow water," Greene says. Also, don't swim when you have diarrhoea because you can spread germs in the water and make other people sick. Take a shower before swimming and wash your hands after using the toilet or changing diapers because germs on your body end up in the water.

By contrast, risk factors for swimmer's ear may include swimming/diving; perspiration; high humidity; mechanical trauma such as removal of wax, use of cotton dabs, and fingernails; hearing aids or headphones; drying soap or