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Health Department

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## Recreational Water Illnesses (RWI)

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### What are Recreational Water Illnesses (RWIs)?

RWIs are sicknesses caused by contact with contaminated water. RWIs can be contracted in natural environments such as lakes, or through man-made structures such as swimming pools.

### What are the symptoms of RWIs?

The most commonly reported RWI symptom is diarrhea. RWIs can also cause nausea, vomiting and a loss of appetite. Infections of the skin, ears, respiratory system, eyes and wounds can also occur.

### How are RWIs spread?

When people are ill with diarrhea, their stool can contain millions of germs. If swimmers are ill with diarrhea, they can contaminate the water if they have an "accident" in the pool. As a result, if someone swallows water that has been contaminated with feces, he/she may become sick.

Many other RWIs are caused by germs that live naturally in the environment. In a pool or hot tub, if disinfectant is not maintained at appropriate levels, these germs can increase to the point where they cause illness when swimmers come into contact with the water.

### Why doesn't chlorine kill the germs?

Chlorine in swimming pools does kill the germs that make people sick, but it takes time. Chlorine in properly disinfected pools kills most germs that can cause RWIs in less than an hour. However, chlorine takes days to kill some germs. During this time, these germs can survive even in a properly disinfected pool.

### How can I prevent RWIs?

Healthy swimming behaviors can help protect you from RWIs and can help stop germs from getting in the pool. Here are six steps to healthy swimming:

- Don't swim when you have diarrhea. This is especially important for kids in diapers. You can spread germs into the water and make other people sick.
- Don't swallow pool water. In fact, try to avoid even having water get in your mouth.
- Practice good hygiene. Take a shower before swimming and wash your hands with soap and water after using the toilet or after changing diapers. Germs on your body end up in the water.
- Take your kids on bathroom breaks or check diapers often. Waiting to hear "I have to go" may mean that it's too late.
- Change diapers in a bathroom and not poolside. Germs can spread to surfaces and objects in and around the pool and spread illness.
- Wash your child thoroughly with soap and water before swimming. Everyone has invisible amounts of fecal matter on their bottoms that end up in the pool.

### For More Information:

Contact the Sedgwick County Health Department Epidemiology Office at 316-660-7392 or visit the Sedgwick County website at [www.sedgwickcounty.org](http://www.sedgwickcounty.org).