

Florida man in hospital after dangerous amoeba infection

September 22 2009, By Walter Pacheco and Bianca Prieto

A 22-year-old Orlando-area man is hospitalized after being infected with the same deadly amoeba that killed three boys in 2007, according to the Orange County, Fla., Health Department.

The department warned county residents to be careful when swimming or doing [water](#) sports in local lakes and ponds, especially when the water is warm, because of the potential for the amoeba *Naegleria fowleri* to be present.

The amoeba can cause amoebic meningoencephalitis, a rare and deadly infection that begins when the water-born amoeba is forced up the nose and then travels to the spinal cord and the brain.

The health department said it would release no details about the current case because of confidentiality rules. But it did note the patient had a "history of freshwater exposure" prior to his hospitalization.

According to the department, that exposure took place at the Orlando Watersports Complex, a water park designed for wakeboarding, wakeskating, kneeboarding and waterskiing. The agency still was investigating whether the young man spent time in other bodies of water, said spokesman Mirna Chamorro.

The parents of one of the boys who died from the amoeba in 2007 later sued that same complex, where the youth had taken wakeboarding lessons prior to his death.

The complex released a statement saying it did not know the identity of the sick man, nor the source of his infection. The statement said Orlando Watersports is "committed, first and foremost, to the safety of its patrons." It follows all state and county health requirements, including water testing, and it encourages its patrons to use nose clips -- and even provides free ones to anyone using its facility, the statement said.

Health officials were at the complex today handing out informational flyers about how residents can protect themselves against the amoeba, Chamorro said.

Symptoms of the disease -- including headaches, nausea, confusion and seizures _ can start within a day of infection or not until two weeks later. Once the symptoms start, the infection typically spreads rapidly, often causing death within three to seven days, the department said.

It is not always fatal, however, Chamorro said.

"Our hearts and prayers go out to this young man's family," said Dr. Kevin M. Sherin, the department's director, in a statement.

The amoeba can be found in any body of fresh water or in poorly maintained or minimally chlorinated pools. It is more likely to be present in warm water and or when water levels are low.

The infection "generally happens during activities such as swimming, diving, water skiing, or wake boarding," the department said.

In the summer of 2007, three boys, ages 10, 11 and 14, died from the amoeba, prompting health officials to post signs about the potential of infection at public swimming sites and Orange County Mayor Rich Crotty to say, "The safest thing you can do right now is to stay out of the water."

The disease is very rare. Nationally, there were 33 cases between 1998 and 2007, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The health department is recommending that residents:

- Avoid "water-related activities" in warm freshwater, bodies of water where water levels are low, hot springs and "thermally polluted water" around power plants.
- Hold their noses shut or use nose clips, if they are taking part in water activities in any of the above.
- Avoid stirring up the sediment in shallow, warm freshwater.

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