

Brain-eating amoeba found in popular Grand Teton soak spot

August 8 2016, by Mead Gruver

A parasitic amoeba that causes deadly brain infections has turned up in a warm spring in Grand Teton National Park, prompting a warning Monday for anybody intent on soaking in the popular pool: If you absolutely must take a dip, try not to get water up your nose.

The single-celled, microscopic *Naegleria fowleri* amoeba typically occurs in the Southern U.S., not the Rocky Mountain West. Nobody on record has fallen ill from the parasite in Wyoming.

Cases of the so-called "brain-eating" amoeba are rare—just a handful in the U.S. every year—but get attention. The amoeba killed an 11-year-old girl in South Carolina on Friday.

Tests recently confirmed the amoeba in Grand Teton's Kelly Warm Spring, a popular spot for locals to take the edge off a mountain-country chill.

"The biggest risk with that is it travels through your nose. We definitely encourage people not to put your head in the water, jump in—anything that would help the amoeba travel to your brain," Grand Teton spokeswoman Denise Germann said.

Better yet, say park officials, don't go in at all. The warm spring also had elevated levels of *E. coli* bacteria, which can cause gastrointestinal illness.

The amoeba and high E. coli also have turned up in two hot springs in the John D. Rockefeller, Jr., Memorial Parkway between Grand Teton and Yellowstone National Park. Soaking in Huckleberry Hot Springs and Polecat Springs in the parkway is prohibited but people sometimes sneak in anyway, said Germann.

Rather than close Kelly Warm Spring to soakers, park officials have decided to keep it in the same do-it-at-your-own-risk category as climbing the Teton Range or floating the Snake River. They've updated warning signs to include the amoeba.

"This is a serious situation and people need to have awareness," Germann said. "We highly encourage that that is not the best place to be swimming, and wading and using the water."

Not just amoebas thrive in the spring's year-round temperatures between 85 and 150 degrees. Park officials plan to eliminate several species of illegally dumped aquarium fish that live there.

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Citation: Brain-eating amoeba found in popular Grand Teton soak spot (2016, August 8)
retrieved 23 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-08-brain-eating-amoeba-popular-grand-teton.html>

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