

Q&A: Swimming and pool-related health issues

6 July 2020, by Nipunie Rajapakse



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Dear Mayo Clinic: We recently moved into a community that has several pools. My children are so excited and ask nightly if they can swim after dinner. Growing up, my mom always made me wait 30 minutes after I ate to swim. Also, I keep hearing about parasites and other waterborne illnesses. Can you clear up the myths from facts so I can keep our family safe while enjoying the pool?

Answer: Moving is always exciting and especially to a place that has amenities for your children to enjoy. Pools can be a great place to relax on a hot summer day, and they provide great social and recreational entertainment. But you are correct. There are many things to be mindful of regarding health and wellness.

Most importantly, before you send your children to the pool, make sure they know how to swim and will always be supervised by a responsible adult. Drowning remains a leading cause of unintentional death for people of all ages, especially children

under 14, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. On average, there are 3,500 fatalities annually from drowning, or about 10 people a day who die from drowning.

Waiting to swim for 30 to 60 minutes after eating has been advice many parents have been giving their children for generations. Originally, it was thought that after you eat, blood may be diverted away from your arms and legs to your gut so that you can digest your food easily. Thus, the advice was to wait since you might get tired or fatigued, and be more likely to drown. We know now that there is no scientific basis for that. While it may not be the most comfortable thing to go for a swim with a full belly, this is not a dangerous activity to routinely enjoy.

Where community swimming [pools](#) can become a problem is if they become contaminated with *Cryptosporidium* parasites. These microscopic parasites live in the intestines of humans or animals, and are shed through stool. Symptoms of *Cryptosporidium* infections include watery diarrhea, dehydration, lack of appetite, weight loss, stomach cramps or pain, fever, or nausea.

Cryptosporidium infections are highly contagious and are one of the more common causes of infectious diarrhea in humans. But there are ways to protect yourself and your family from becoming ill.

Inquire with your community pool about the cleaning schedule, any testing that is performed on the water, and whether there have been cases of *Cryptosporidium* or other infections reported from people who have recently used the pool. In addition to the risk of *Cryptosporidium* [infection](#), you would want to avoid swimming in a pool that does not perform cleaning and water treatment regularly.

Consider these other recommendations for avoiding infections from your community swimming pool:

Don't swim or let your kids swim if they are sick and have diarrhea. If they have been diagnosed with *Cryptosporidium* they should wait two weeks after the diarrhea has stopped before returning to the pool. The parasite has been detected in stool up to two weeks after diarrhea has gotten better.

Rinse off in the shower before and after getting in the pool to remove germs on your body that could contaminate the water.

Remind your child to avoid swallowing water from the swimming pool.

For younger children especially, take frequent bathroom breaks and check diapers in a diaper-changing area, not next to the pool.

Wash your hands well with soap and water after using the bathroom and changing diapers. Alcohol-based hand sanitizers are not effective against *Cryptosporidium*.

In most healthy people, the symptoms of this infection will resolve within a couple of weeks without any treatment. The most important thing is to drink plenty of fluids and stay well-hydrated. However, the infection can be more severe and prolonged in people with weakened immune systems or underlying digestive system issues (e.g. inflammatory bowel disease). People with those conditions should talk to their [health care provider](#) to find out whether they need to be tested or treated for *Cryptosporidium* or other infectious causes of diarrhea

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