



National Poll on Children's Health

Few Parents Enforce Shower-Before-Pool Rules That Prevent Illness From Waterparks

Water parks offer children and families a chance to be physically active. But that fun may come with the risk of getting sick with an infection such as cryptosporidiosis—a recreational water illness (RWI) spread by breathing in mists or aerosols or swallowing or having contact with contaminated water. People infected with RWIs have symptoms such as vomiting, diarrhea, strong abdominal cramps and fever.

Although chlorine kills most germs that cause RWIs within an hour, the germ that causes cryptosporidiosis can survive for days even in properly disinfected water. Therefore, it's important for water park patrons to help prevent cryptosporidiosis by showering to rinse off any germs prior to entering the water.

In May 2011, the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked parents of children 5-12 years old about their perceptions of water park risks and whether they observe basic water park rules about showering.

Water Park Use and Perceptions of Risks

Four in 10 families with children in elementary school report that they have been to a water park in the last year. Compared to other possible risks at water parks, parents who use water parks do not perceive a big risk of recreational water infections. Only 15% think there is a high risk of children getting sick from water at water parks. In contrast, 33% of parents believe that there is a high risk of their children drowning at a water park.

Rules and Responsibilities

Parents' views on rules to prevent recreational water infections show some inconsistencies. Most parents (64%) feel it is *very important* for children to not swallow the water at a water park. However, only 26% of parents think it is *very important* to shower before getting in the water.

Most parents also may not appreciate their role in preventing recreational water infections. While 65% of parents feel that preventing RWIs is a shared responsibility between parents and water park staff, 28% of parents feel water park staff alone are responsible.

Implications

Water parks are an appealing way for children and families to stay active and have fun together. However, recent increases in the number of recreational water illnesses are of concern to doctors and public health officials. This poll found that most parents perceive a very low risk of RWIs for their kids—even though RWIs affect over 10,000 Americans each year. In contrast, many parents perceive that there is a higher risk of their child drowning at a water park, yet the risk of drowning is much lower than the risk of RWIs.

A concern from this poll is relatively few parents fully understand their role in preventing RWIs. Most parents acknowledge the importance of not swallowing the water, but far fewer feel it is very important to shower before getting into the water. It seems likely that many parents simply are not aware of the rationale behind the "shower before entering"

rule that is posted at water parks nationwide. Thus, parents see preventing water infections as the job of the water park staff, not as their own parental responsibility. Broad parent education is needed to address this gap.

In addition, water park staff and parents will benefit from a more collaborative approach to preventing RWIs. Staff can follow state-of-the-art steps to managing risks of cryptosporidiosis, which include treating with high levels of chlorine

intermittently and using ozone or ultra-violet treatment technologies. Parents can follow these easy steps:

- Wash thoroughly with soap and water (especially for young children in the diaper region) before swimming.
- Take children on bathroom breaks or check diapers often.
- Remind children to not swallow the water and avoid getting water in the mouth.
- Do not swim when you are ill with diarrhea.

Report Highlights

41% of parents have taken their children to a water park in the past year.

Only 26% of parents think it's very important to shower before getting in the water.

28% of parents believe that preventing infections is the sole responsibility of water park staff.

A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics and Communicable Diseases, and the University of Michigan Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR)



This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Knowledge Network, Inc. (KN), for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital via a method used in many published studies. The survey was administered in May 2011 to a randomly selected, stratified group of parents age 18 and older (n=865) with a child age 5 to 12 from the KN standing panel that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 54% among parent panel members contacted to participate. The margin of sampling error is ± 4 to 6 percentage points.

Findings from the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health do not represent the opinions of the investigators or the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.

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