Avoiding illness when swimming or playing
in natural bodies of water (lakes, rivers, ocean, hot springs)
FACT SHEET

Natural bodies of water, especially warm and stagnant water, may contain organisms that can cause illness in people. Bacteria, amoebae, parasites and other naturally occurring microorganisms can cause diarrhea; skin, eye and ear infections; respiratory infections; neurologic infections; wound infections and other illnesses. Illness may range from mild to severe and even life-threatening. Other contaminants, such as chemicals or other pollution, may also cause illness.

People can take simple precautions to protect themselves against water-borne illness when recreating in natural waters.

Choose swimming areas carefully
- Pay attention to signage and avoid swimming in coastal waters that are under a swimming advisory and in inland waters that have been closed or under advisory because of pollution or other risks.
- Do not swim or play in stagnant water or water with dead fish or algae in it.
- Do not swim or play in natural waters immediately after a heavy rain, as contaminants in the surrounding area may have washed into the water.
- Do not swim or play in waters near sewer pipes, discharge pipes, or storm drain outlets.
- Do not swim in water that is also frequented by livestock or other land animals.

Take simple precautions
- Avoid getting the water in your mouth, and do not drink or swallow the water.
- Reduce the risk of water going up your nose by holding your nose shut or using nose clips when taking part in water-related activities in bodies of warm freshwater such as lakes, rivers, or hot springs.
- Avoid digging in or stirring up the sediment while taking part in water-related activities in shallow, warm freshwater areas.
- Do not swim in natural waters, whether fresh or salt water, if you have open wounds or sores.
- Shower with soap and water after swimming or playing in the water.
- Promptly tend to any wounds, cuts or abrasions you get while in or near the water: thoroughly wash the wound with clean, potable water and soap, and seek a doctor's care if a rash or swelling develops around the wound or it appears infected.
- Seek a doctor's care immediately if you become ill or develop symptoms of an infection.

Prevent spread of illness to others
- Shower with soap before entering the water.
- Don't swim if you have diarrhea.
- Change children's diapers frequently, and dispose of soiled diapers in appropriate trash receptacles.

Sources: CDC, WebMD, EPA, N.C. Divisions of Public Health and Environmental Health