Many of us seek out cool, comforting water to help beat the summer heat. Be aware, however, that pools, lakes and even the ocean can harbor infection-causing organisms. Here are some facts you should know:

Swimming with germs

The most frequently reported recreational water illness is diarrhea caused by swallowing contaminated water. Even though swimming pools are treated with bacteria-reducing chemicals, swallowing the water can potentially make you sick. Germ particles that wash off a person who is ill with diarrhea can contaminate the water before bacteria-killing chemicals have a chance to work. Filter systems help but it takes time for the water to be recycled properly.

Lakes and rivers can become contaminated with germs from sewage, water runoff and direct human contamination. Germs can even live for long periods of time in salt water. Avoid swimming in areas that have been identified as unsafe by health departments. You can access the Watershed Management Bureau website at www.des.state.nh.us/wmb for a list of beaches found to be unsuitable for swimming due to high levels of bacteria.

To be safe

• Avoid swallowing water when you swim.
• Stay out of the water if you have diarrhea. This is especially important for diaper-aged children. Diapers and swimming diapers do not prevent leakage of diarrhea.
• Take bathroom breaks frequently, especially with children.
• Always wash hands well using soap and water after using the bathroom.
• Whenever possible, shower using soap and water after swimming.

People with compromised immune systems (such as those who are recipients of organ transplants, those receiving certain types of chemotherapy or those living with AIDS) can suffer from more severe illness than healthy individuals infected with contaminated water. Pregnant women and young children are also at increased risk.

Swimmer’s itch

Swimmer’s itch appears as a skin rash caused by an allergic reaction to parasites released by infected snails into fresh and salt water. The parasite larva burrows into the swimmer’s skin but soon dies, as humans are not hosts to this particular parasite. Symptoms include tingling, burning or itching of the skin, small reddish pimples or small blisters. The more often you swim or wade in contaminated water, the more likely you are to develop more serious symptoms. To relieve the rash:

• Apply cool compresses to affected areas of skin for comfort
• Add baking soda to bath water and soak
• Soak in oatmeal baths
• Use an anti-itch lotion such as calamine lotion
• Apply corticosteroid cream to itchy areas
• Don’t scratch the rash as this may result in secondary bacterial infections. To prevent swimmer’s itch, shower or towel dry immediately after leaving the water.

Swimmer’s ear

Too much moisture in the ear can irritate and break down the skin in the ear canal, allowing bacteria or fungi to penetrate. This causes an infection, inflammation, or irritation of the outer ear canal.

Avoiding contaminated water will help you to avoid swimmer’s ear. Symptoms include pain that is worsened with gentle pulling on the outer ear, itching of the ear or ear canal, or drainage (yellow, yellow-green, pus-like or foul-smelling) from the ear. Call your doctor if you suspect swimmer’s ear. Effective medications include ear drops containing antibiotics to fight infection and corticosteroids to reduce inflammation and itching. Always dry ears thoroughly after exposure to water. Consider putting a few drops of a 1:1 mixture of alcohol and white vinegar in the ears after they get wet. Then, tip head sideways to drain extra solution from ears. Or, apply a few drops of an alcohol-based over-the-counter ear product into the ear. Ask a pharmacist at your local drug store for this product. Finally, never insert Q-tips or objects into the ear canal as this could cause injury.

For more information, contact your doctor or call Elliot On-Call at 663-4567.

This article was first printed in Your Wellness Matters, Summer 2007 issue.