Summer Swims: Great for Your Health, but Know the Risks

May 28, 2013

Swimming is a great full-body workout that can help everyone get and stay fit. But whether you're splashing around in a pool, lake, river or water park, there are all sorts of potential risks, according to a still-relevant 2009 report by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) that was recently referenced in an article by the Quad City Times.

The CDC report found an average of 3,533 drownings each year in the United States. That's 10 drownings a day in the summer, making it the nation's fifth-leading cause of unintentional death. What's more, one in five people who drown are 14 years old or younger; nearly 80 percent of people who die from drowning are male; and African-American children are almost three times more likely to have a fatal drowning incident than white kids.

Experts say the most dangerous place in a swimming pool is the drop-off area, where water depth changes from shallow to deep. In the outdoors, strong currents in lakes and rivers or unexpected natural barriers in the water are also common areas of risk.

But drowning isn't the only health and safety concern. Certain illnesses can be spread in the water, including diarrhea, skin infections, respiratory diseases, various eye and ear problems, and infections in wounds.

"Pool users should be aware of how to prevent infections while swimming," said Michele Hlavsa, RN, MPH, the chief of the CDC's swimming program. "Remember, chlorine and other disinfectants don't kill germs instantly."

A recent report from the CDC showed that almost 60 percent of pool water samples in 2012 tested positive for E. coli, a bacteria from the human digestive system that commonly causes infection and diarrhea. To avoid ingesting bacteria, don't drink the water in pools and spray parks. In addition, parents should buy swim diapers for their toddlers who aren't toilet trained—a common requirement at pools. Officials also suggested that parents supervise their children when they're in or around the water and that they know and observe all pool swimming safety tips.

According to another study by the USA Swimming Foundation, nearly 60 percent of African-American children can't swim. Click here to read more.

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