



Caddo County Health Department

For Release: July 11, 2016

Health Officials Urge Caution When Swimming in Natural Bodies of Water

As the intense heat of late summer drives Oklahomans to find relief in lakes, rivers and streams, the Oklahoma State Department of Health (OSDH) wants to remind everyone of the risk of water-related illness as natural bodies of water are not disinfected. Recreational bodies of water can be contaminated with germs from sewage spills, animal waste, water runoff following rainfall and germs from swimmers.

Healthy swimming behaviors can prevent recreational water illnesses such as norovirus and *E. coli*. Swallowing these germs from contaminated water can result in diarrhea, vomiting and stomach cramps. Furthermore, as the heat and drought conditions intensify during late summer in Oklahoma, the risk of primary amebic meningoencephalitis (PAM) also increases.

PAM is an extremely rare and usually deadly disease caused by infection with a single-celled organism (ameba) known as *Naegleria fowleri*. These disease-causing organisms are naturally present in most lakes, ponds and rivers but multiply rapidly in very warm and stagnant water. Swimmers may be exposed to the ameba when they dive or submerge their head in contaminated water. The ameba then travels up the nose to the brain where it destroys brain tissue.

Symptoms of PAM initially include high fever, headache, nausea and vomiting. Later, symptoms may include stiff neck, seizures, hallucinations and coma. PAM cannot be spread from person-to-person. Most cases occur in the southern states. Since 1998, seven cases have occurred among Oklahomans.

Another threat is blue-green algae, which is present in some Oklahoma lakes. The algae can produce toxins which result in illness in humans and animals. Direct contact with water that has a blue-green algae bloom can result in a skin rash; eye, ear and throat irritation; asthma-like symptoms; and diarrhea, vomiting or abdominal cramps. Individuals are advised to avoid swimming or other recreational water activities where mats of algae appear on the water.

Health officials encourage Oklahomans to observe these water safety tips to avoid illness while swimming in lakes, rivers and other natural bodies of water:

- Hold your nose or use nose plugs when jumping or diving into water.
- Never swim in stagnant or polluted water.
- Do not swim in areas posted as "No Swimming".
- Avoid swallowing water from rivers, lakes, streams or stock ponds.
- Use earplugs, swim goggles or masks if you tend to get ear or eye infections.

For more information, visit: <http://go.usa.gov/xcHAh>.

###