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AMOEBIIC MENINGITIS WARNING AS WATER TEMPERATURES RISE

With summer in full swing, parents are being urged to take precautions around untreated or poorly treated water to protect children from potentially deadly amoebic meningitis.

Hunter New England Public Health Physician, Dr David Durrheim, said the amoeba that occurs in warm natural surface waters and soil causes infection which is rare but nearly always fatal.

“Amoebic meningitis can occur if water containing amoebae goes up someone’s nose,” Dr Durrheim said.

“At particular risk are people in rural areas who have their own tank, dam or bore water supply, such as those living on farms, and people with poorly maintained swimming pools.

“Any unchlorinated water supply that seasonally exceeds 30°C or continually exceeds 25°C may be a risk. This includes lakes, rivers, dams, bores, tanks, garden hoses, natural hot springs, and spa and swimming pools that are poorly maintained.

“People should be careful to prevent water going up their nose while swimming, diving or falling into warm, unchlorinated water, or while children are playing under garden sprinklers.

“Shallow wading pools are particularly at risk if they have been left in the sun for a long time.

“Children and young adults appear to be more susceptible to infection than older adults. In younger people the amoeba can more easily travel up the nose to the brain where they infect and destroy brain tissue.

“The bug that causes the illness does not survive in water that is clean, cool and adequately chlorinated,” Dr Durrheim said.

The best way to avoid infection is:

- avoid jumping or diving into bodies of warm fresh water or thermal pools
- keep your head above water in spas, thermal pools and warm fresh water bodies
- ensure swimming pools and spas are adequately chlorinated and well maintained
- empty and clean small collapsible wading pools and let them dry in the sun after each use
- flush warm water from hoses before allowing children to play with hoses or sprinklers

If you are using unchlorinated water:

- don't allow water to go up your nose when bathing, showering or washing your face
- supervise children playing with hoses or sprinklers and teach them not to squirt water up their nose

More information can be found at:

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/environment/water/Pages/naegleria.aspx>

<http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/Infectious/factsheets/Pages/Naegleria-fowleri.aspx>