

SWIMMERS REMINDED OF POTENTIAL HEALTH RISKS



Though summer is quickly coming to a close, temperatures across the Brazos River basin have not cooled down. With little rain during the past several weeks, many rivers and lakes have formed areas of stagnant or slow moving water, creating conditions that encourage the growth of a rare but dangerous microorganism.

Primary amebic meningoencephalitis or PAM, which is most common during the summer, is a rare disease caused by *naegleria fowleri*, an amoeba found in almost all untreated, fresh surface water and in soil. The amoeba thrives in low levels of fresh water that is warmer than 80 degrees and stagnant or slow-moving.

Swimmers may unknowingly expose themselves to this deadly disease while diving, jumping or water skiing. The PAM infection occurs when water containing the organism is forced into the nasal passages. The amoeba makes its way into the brain and spinal cord, destroying brain tissue. The resulting infection is almost always fatal.

Symptoms include severe headache, high fever, stiff neck, nausea, vomiting, seizures and hallucinations as the condition worsens. Although PAM is rare – affecting about one to three people a year in Texas – those infected usually succumb to the disease within a week.

There has been one confirmed case of PAM in Texas this summer. Ten other deaths have been reported in the state since 2000.

To prevent infection, it is recommended that those taking part in warm, fresh water-related activities use nose clips or hold their noses shut while jumping into water. With the amoeba often found in soil, it is best to avoid stirring up underwater sediment. The Texas Department of Health recommends that people avoid stagnant or polluted water and take “No Swimming” signs seriously.

PAM cannot be spread person to person nor by drinking water. Swimming pools and hot tubs that are properly cleaned, maintained and chlorinated are generally safe, as is salt water.

For more information contact the Texas Department of State Health Services Public Information Office at (512) 458-7400.

