

Preventing Water Recreational Illnesses in Washington

Between 1991 and 2000, 18 confirmed water recreational illness outbreaks occurred in Washington State affecting an estimated 1,018 people, according to The Health of Washington State, 2002. As Whatcom County Health Department's (WCHD) Environmental Health Division demonstrated in a pilot project during summer 2001, even low-budget education activities can focus a community's attention on this public health concern.

In spring 2001, WCHD staff began a Water Recreational Illness (WRI) Prevention Project. We researched the causes and effects of WRI, as well as other health departments' responses and their resulting materials, policies, laws, and procedures. Using the information we gathered, we developed a model illustrating the causes of WRI and possible interventions.

For the project, we defined WRIs as enteric diseases (such as *E. coli* infection, Norwalk virus, salmonellosis, giardiasis) that could be contracted from Whatcom County's freshwater recreational areas. We also included swimmer's itch. Because of its perennial prevalence and immediate discomfort, we believed it would act as a hook for drawing attention to the other diseases.

Children up to four years old were our target population because of their vulnerability to the more devastating aspects of enteric diseases. We targeted parents of young children, who could take the needed prevention measures, for our education activities.

We invited community gatekeepers, such as swimming instructors, summer camp directors, and park rangers, to meet and discuss WRIs. We needed to learn what community swimming organizations were doing and were interested in doing about them. Our goal was also to develop working partnerships with key "gatekeepers" well before any outbreak occurred.

The gatekeepers and WCHD staff agreed to focus the first year's prevention work on education efforts, since no resources were available for engineering (such as sprinkler playgrounds for tots) or enforcement (such as policies preventing non-toilet trained children in lakes). WCHD developed three education pieces, which the gatekeeper groups agreed to post and distribute to their swimming clients:

- Signs promoting the importance of handwashing, not feeding waterfowl, and keeping swimming water out of the mouth

- A brochure about all three subjects that also included a quiz as an education tool to help parents teach their young children about WRIs
- A "static cling" sticker promoting handwashing to be used as a prize for answering the quiz and to put the handwashing message immediately in the swimmers' faces, via restroom mirrors

Results show what counts

We had no known WRI outbreaks during summer 2001. In October 2001, we evaluated the project by surveying the gatekeepers by telephone about the types of use and the barriers to posting and distributing the pieces. We learned four key lessons about WRI education.

Use alternative methods of distribution. Sixty percent or more of the gatekeepers posted or distributed the signage, brochure, and static clings in some manner. The summer is so busy for parks and summer camps, however, that additional ways for distribution, such as including the WRI brochure in mailings or education self-service displays, would be useful.

Reach other educators. The project focused education efforts toward parents, but as WCHD staff and some gatekeepers have reported, many parents leave children unattended at lakes and pools. This suggests that childcare professionals and elementary teachers should also be targeted for educating children about WRIs.

Include all three Es. Education efforts need to continue, but discussion should also begin on feasible *engineering* and *enforcement* efforts that will not burden but will help already busy park, summer camp, and swimming safety staff.

Encourage team building. Other communities that have had outbreaks describe the ill feelings among public health agencies, recreation managers, and the public. We believe that Whatcom County's efforts to promote trusting and helpful partnerships will benefit the county if a WRI outbreak occurs. 🐸

Authors

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Static cling sticker for restroom mirrors.