

Don't Mistake This for a Superfood, a Few Slurps Could Kill Your Pet

Just because your pet has never become ill after engaging in this enjoyable canine pastime doesn't mean he's immune. He's been lucky, that's all. Find out why you need to always have a watchful eye out, especially after he's had his fun and games.

Reviewed by Dr. Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- If your dog loves to swim in natural bodies of water, there are certain waterborne diseases you should be aware of
- These infections are caused by specific types of bacteria and parasites that can contaminate water and include blue-green algae, cryptosporidiosis, giardiasis, leptospirosis and pythiosis
- Since there's no way to know whether a plant is poisonous without testing, experts advise that all blooms floating on natural bodies of water should be considered toxic
- Keep in mind that illnesses from swimming are quite rare in dogs. Just stay alert for signs of a problem after your dog takes a swim
- The sooner you get your dog to your veterinarian after the first signs appear, the better the prognosis

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Summer is now here, and you and your dog are probably excited to spend these next months playing in the sunshine and swimming in the sea, river, or lake! Fortunately, the majority of dogs who love to swim during the warmer months of the year come out unscathed.

If you and your canine companion are looking forward to splashing around in the water this summer, it's always a good idea to keep information on potential health hazards. This article will discuss about diseases that can lurk in your dog's favorite swimming hole and other standing bodies of water.

5 Waterborne Diseases You Should Be Aware Of

1. **Blue-green algae** — **Blue-green algae** contain deadly microorganisms called cyanobacteria, which are microscopic organisms found in freshwater lakes, streams, ponds (including backyard ponds) and brackish (salty) water ecosystems. The algae give the water a blue-green or "pea soup" appearance.

This type of blue-green algae is different from the species that is considered a superfood. The algae grown in controlled environments for the nutraceutical, supplement and food industries are entirely different than the algae that naturally bloom in lakes and ponds. Spirulina and other types of health-giving algae have been

proven to be safe and very beneficial.

Since there's no way to know whether a plant is poisonous without testing, experts advise that all blooms floating on natural bodies of water should be considered toxic. Even minor exposure, such as a dog drinking a few mouthfuls of contaminated water, can be lethal.

If you suspect your dog has been exposed, rinse him with fresh water, administer high-potency homeopathic Nux Vomica if possible and seek emergency vet care immediately. Symptomatic patients may need to be hospitalized to receive life-saving treatments such as intravenous (IV) fluids, medications to control seizures or vomiting, oxygen therapy and blood transfusions.

2. **Cryptosporidiosis** — **Cryptosporidiosis** is a disease caused by a protozoan parasite. The infection causes gastroenteritis and diarrhea in a variety of animals, but fortunately, it isn't all that common in dogs. Cryptosporidiosis can be a primary disease as well as a secondary disorder in pets with compromised immune systems.

Animals infected with the cryptosporidium parasite shed it in their feces. In damp environments, the organism can survive for up to six months, and can be transmitted if your dog ingests contaminated food or water, or licks or comes in contact with a contaminated object or surface.

In pets with healthy immune systems, cryptosporidiosis is self-limiting, and often an infected dog will show no symptoms. Others may have mild diarrhea and typically recover quickly. In symptomatic pets, signs of infection occur within a few days of exposure, and can include lethargy, abdominal cramping, watery diarrhea, loss of appetite and weight loss.

Symptoms usually resolve without treatment, though occasionally the diarrhea persists, and the animal can become dehydrated. Since cryptosporidiosis is primarily a disease of young animals with immature immune systems, as well as immunocompromised pets, the best way to prevent your dog from becoming ill after exposure is to make sure her immune system is healthy.

To prevent your dog from contracting cryptosporidiosis, don't allow her to ingest animal feces or drink from any body of water that could be contaminated.

3. **Giardiasis** — Giardia parasites are ubiquitous in the environment. They're in rivers, ponds, puddles and other locations. Giardia is also zoonotic, meaning that if the family dog has it or a human family member has it, the entire rest of the family — humans and animals — can be infected.

The most common route of transmission of giardia is through feces-contaminated water. Once inside your dog's small intestine, the cyst opens and releases the active form of the parasite. The majority of giardia infections are asymptomatic. When symptoms are present, the most common is diarrhea, which can be acute, chronic or intermittent.

Since the giardia parasite isn't consistently shed in every stool sample, any patient with a history of bowel problems should be tested for giardia with an ELISA or PCR test.

A fecal ELISA test is different from a fecal flotation test in that it checks for giardia antigens present in the body even if the parasite isn't shed in the tested fecal sample. A fecal float test only checks for evidence of

giardia cysts in a stool sample. If your dog is suffering from chronic diarrhea, make sure you ask for a fecal antigen test in addition to a regular fecal float.

4. **Leptospirosis** — The pathogen that causes this disease, *Leptospira* bacteria, is transmitted in the urine of infected animals. Rats are the most common carriers, but other animals that carry the disease include raccoons, opossums, dogs, goats, sheep, pigs, cattle and horses. The bacteria can be deposited in soil and water and survive for weeks or even months.

Dogs typically pick up the bacteria through a cut or break in the skin when they come in contact with or drink contaminated water. At highest risk for leptospirosis are pets that spend a lot of time in the water or in areas that get rain or snow runoff, as well as dogs that drink from puddles or ponds.

Infection is most common in the summer months, the early fall and during periods of flooding. At home, you can reduce the risk of infection by safely controlling the rodent population in and around your home. If you live where infections are a problem, it's important to keep your pet away from ponds, slow moving water and standing or stagnant water.

If you have a healthy dog who suddenly has a fever, grows lethargic, perhaps is urinating excessively or is urinating bright fresh blood, you need to call your veterinarian immediately and get your pet in for a lepto test.

Leptospirosis is a treatable bacterial infection — it's only when a diagnosis isn't made early enough that dogs suffer unnecessarily. Because the vaccine causes significant reactions in dogs and is not protective against most serovars, most integrative vets do not recommend lepto vaccines.

5. **Pythiosis** — Sometimes called "swamp cancer," pythiosis is a rare but severe waterborne disease caused by the *Pythium insidiosum* organism, which is a water mold. The disease is most common in the Gulf States in this country, Southeast Asia and South America. The infection is caused by direct contact with water that harbors the fungal parasite. Typically a dog will either swallow or inhale contaminated water.

Because it's an uncommon and difficult-to-diagnose disease, pythiosis often goes undiscovered until it's quite serious. It can start in a dog's skin with large, red, itchy bumps. Pythiosis of the sinus, brain or lungs will cause stuffiness, headache, fever, coughing and swelling of the sinuses. If it starts in the gastrointestinal (GI) tract, it will cause vomiting, diarrhea and weight loss.

The sooner you get your dog to your veterinarian after the first signs appear, the better the prognosis. Dogs who contract the disease must undergo surgical removal of the affected tissue.

These are just a few of the diseases your pet can acquire from water, but keep in mind that illnesses from swimming are quite rare in dogs. Just stay alert for signs of a problem after your dog takes a swim, and if you notice anything unusual, make an appointment with your veterinarian. Be sure to tell your vet that your dog has recently been in the water.

Sources and References

[PetMD, June 30, 2016](#)
