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Today the Rhode Island Department of Health (HEALTH) reported that stool specimens from 19 of the patients who became ill with diarrheal illness after swimming at Spring Lake Beach on July 4, are positive for the bacterium Shigella Sonnei.

HEALTH began investigating the outbreak of gastrointestinal illness associated with the public swimming area on July 6. To date, 92 individuals have been identified as ill and 16 have been hospitalized with bloody diarrhea. All swam at Spring Lake Beach in Burrillville on July 4. HEALTH believes that Shigella came from fecal contamination of the water on that date.

Approximately 80% of the people who are ill are children under 18 years of age. Hospitalized cases at Hasbro Children's Hospital are recovering well and no severe illness has been reported in adults.

"Anyone who recently swam at Spring Lake and is experiencing diarrhea, abdominal pain, fever, or vomiting should see his or her doctor," said Michael Fine, MD, Director of Health.

Most people infected with Shigella develop diarrhea, fever, and stomach cramps starting one to three days after exposure, and most infections are not severe and last between 48 and 72 hours. Mild episodes do not require antimicrobial therapy. Because some people may not show signs of illness for between one and three days, HEALTH expects we may see a few new cases.

HEALTH is reopening Spring Lake beach for swimming beginning tomorrow, as water test results from Sunday and Monday show no evidence of fecal coliform bacteria. In addition, Shigella does not survive outside the body for long periods and does not survive in warm temperatures. The water temperature in Spring Lake has been high over the last several days.

"Town officials from Burrillville were extremely helpful throughout this investigation," said Dr. Fine. "I thank them for their cooperation and assistance."

All licensed beaches in Rhode Island are now open for swimming. (Oakland Beach in Warwick, which had been closed since late June because of high bacteria counts, also is reopening on July 10).

What Sick People Should Do

- People who are sick should wash their hands often and avoid food handling in the family and work environment.
- People with active diarrhea should be kept out of school, day-care, camp, work, and community activities until completely free of diarrhea.

-Anyone who recently swam at Spring Lake and is experiencing diarrhea, abdominal pain, fever, or vomiting should see his or her doctor.

For more information, contact the HEALTH Information Line: 401-222-5960 / RI Relay 711.

Related links

Department or agency: Department of Health

Online: <http://www.health.ri.gov>

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