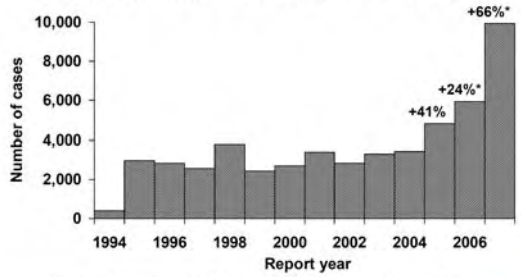
Crypto Alert: Increasing Reports of Crypto Cases and Outbreaks

Crypto cases are on the rise!

Cryptosporidiosis ("Crypto") is a recreational water illness (RWI) that causes diarrhea. It is a chlorine-resistant germ that the aquatics sector has been dealing with since 1988 and is likely to pose an even bigger challenge in the future. The number of Crypto cases reported to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has risen substantially in recent years. In 2005, 2006, and 2007 the number of non-outbreak–related Crypto cases rose 41%, 24%, and 66%, respectively (see Figure 1). In 2006 and 2007 considerable increases in the number of outbreaks associated with treated venues, such as pools and recreational water parks, were also reported to the CDC (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Cryptosporidiosis Non-Outbreak Cases: United States, 1994–2007*

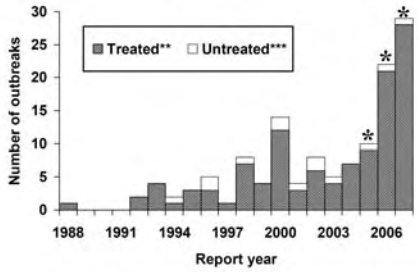


* Counts for 2006 and 2007 are preliminary. Annually (1994–2007), 17–58% of case reports do not indicate outbreak status. Cases with "unknown" outbreak status are included in this graph.

Why is this happening?

A combination of factors may be contributing to these trends. To begin with, in 2005 the first drug for treating adults with Crypto was approved. The availability of this new drug likely increased the chance that healthcare providers will test for Crypto if they have a patient with diarrhea. Heightened awareness about the disease may also have caused swimmers, healthcare providers, and health departments to think about where a person recently swam rather than the last place he or she ate. Another possibility could be that increases in the number of cases detected by Crypto tracking systems have increased the likelihood that the cases will be investigated and more outbreaks will be identified. Finally, Crypto may be spreading through various parts of the country. It is unknown how much of the observed increases in reports of Crypto cases and outbreaks is attributable to each of these factors.

Figure 2: Cryptosporidiosis Outbreaks by Recreational Water Type: United States, 1988–2007*



* Counts for 2005–2007 are preliminary. N=68 (1998–2004); *MMWR* 2006;55(SS12):1–30.
** Pools, recreational water parks, interactive fountains, etc.
*** Lakes, rivers, oceans, etc.

How can you help?

Become more informed about the issues related to recreational water illnesses. Build a relationship with your local health department and ask if they have a health alert network for you to receive news about outbreaks in your area. Become knowledgeable about prevention strategies related to RWI's. Train your staff so they are aware of Crypto, other RWI's, prevention strategies, and how to carry out your outbreak response plan. Operate at 110%, through regular system checks using the latest technology and practices. Be a part of the effort to develop a National Model Aquatic Health Code (www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming/model_code.htm). Remember that typical levels of chlorine in a pool and normal pool filtration are not effective against Crypto so swimmer involvement is essential. The public needs to be fully engaged in this effort. Operators and public health professionals should work together and educate the public about the basics of healthy swimming behaviors (i.e., don't swim when ill with diarrhea; don't swallow pool water; practice good hygiene; etc.). RWI Prevention Week 2008 (May 19-25, 2008) is a great place to start this effort. You can find additional information and resources at www.cdc.gov/healthyswimming.