

Water Activities on Natural Rivers

You may have read of problems with the water quality of our rivers and with people becoming ill after undertaking activities on the water. I am pleased to say that the situation over the last few years has improved beyond all recognition and that the water quality has improved enormously. Thousands of people enjoy water-based activities every year and very few of these have any problems.

Please read the information below so that you are fully aware of the situation:

Most people using our rivers have no ill effects at all. The commonest illness found is a mild gastrointestinal disturbance ("Tummy upset"), which can occasionally lead to diarrhoea and vomiting. If this happens you are advised to consult a doctor. Flu-like symptoms and mild respiratory symptoms may also occur, as may eye and ear symptoms. These generally resolve themselves rapidly without treatment.

More Serious infections

Hepatitis A is a virus infection of the liver, which can vary from mild or unapparent illness to, rarely, a severe disabling disease lasting several months. The infection is caused by swallowing food or water contaminated with the virus, which is present in the faeces of infected patients, in sewage and in waters contaminated with sewage. Infection has been caused by swallowing water during water sports. The incubation period varies from two to six weeks after swallowing the virus. The onset of illness is abrupt, with loss of appetite, fever, nausea and abdominal discomfort, followed within a few days by jaundice. If you become ill at any time with these symptoms, call your doctor and tell him/her that you have participated in water sports.

Leptospirosis (Weil's Disease)

Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection by organisms called Leptospire. There are many different leptospire, which can infect a wide range of animals. Humans are usually infected from animal sources by organisms shed in the urine of infected animals. Human infections can range from a mild flu-like illness to a serious illness requiring hospital treatment and sometimes leading to kidney or liver failure. When jaundice occurs (from liver failure) the illness, known as Weil's disease, can be fatal and is a notifiable illness, but it is fortunately a very rare occurrence.

The particular Leptospire, which causes Weil's disease, is commonly carried by rats and excreted in rat urine, which contaminates water and wet riverbanks. The bacteria do not survive in dry conditions.

Leptospire can contaminate any water including swift streams and rivers. The likelihood of becoming infected is greater from stagnant or slow-moving waterways, particularly in high water conditions.

The Leptospire enter the body through skin abrasions, or through the eyes, nose or mouth. They enter the bloodstream more readily through minor cuts in skin, especially on the feet or if you do repeated capsize drills.

What should you do about it?

If you fall ill with symptoms after water sports, particularly from 3-19 days following the activity, then see your doctor immediately. Common symptoms are sudden onset of fever, intense headache, severe pains in calf and back muscles, red eyes and prostration.

Preventative Measures

These are largely common sense. Avoid undue immersion in natural waters. Avoid swallowing the water. Cover minor scratches or cuts with a Waterproof plaster. Use footwear to protect feet. Wash or shower as soon as possible after water sports and before eating and drinking.

Illness is very rare

Please remember hundreds of thousands of people enjoy our waterways every year without becoming ill but it is important to recognise symptoms should they occur.