Dear Alice,

I have been frequently going to a public beach that is infested with Canada geese poop. It is everywhere! There are a lot of children and families also at this beach. I am wondering what the health risks are to children as well as to adults sitting and playing in this feces?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Canada geese feces can be hazardous to people's health, but usually only when inhaled or ingested. Walking past geese feces, or even lounging near them on the beach is likely safe for healthy people. However, the elderly, children, and pregnant or breastfeeding women are particularly susceptible to health risks posed by parasites that inhabit Canada geese feces. At even higher risk are those with weak immune systems, such as people with HIV/AIDS, chemotherapy recipients, and recent organ donors and recipients. Similarly, people with gastrointestinal (GI) problems, such as ulcers and irritable bowel disease, are also at increased risk, since they, too, cannot easily combat parasites from Canada geese feces.

Geese feces usually contain the parasites cryptosporidium, giardia, coliform, and campylobacter. Cryptosporidium poses the most serious health hazard, since it causes cryptosporidiosis, an illness with the following symptoms:

- watery diarrhea
- dehydration
- weight loss
- stomach cramps or pain
- fever
- nausea
- vomiting

Cryptosporidium was responsible for a 1993 outbreak of disease in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, when the city's water supply became contaminated. One hundred people died and 400,000 became ill during this epidemic. The risk for a city or town's water supply becoming infected with cryptosporidium lingers as some municipalities do not check their water for this parasite at all. Wisely, New York City has been testing its water supply regularly for this parasite since 1992 as part of its water safety monitoring program.

In most cases, geese excrement cannot cause bodily harm to people unless it's inhaled or
ingested. Children are more at risk for accidental ingestion of Canada geese feces since they usually play directly on the beach. Most healthy people infected with *cryptosporidium* have extended diarrhea and other symptoms associated with *cryptosporidium*, which usually dissipate with time if no other GI problems are present. This infection can become serious if untreated since dehydration can set in. As a result, if people have GI distress for more than a couple of days, they need to see their health care provider. Parazyne, an herbal medication used to treat water-borne parasitic infection, may be recommended.

Some geographic areas with high numbers of geese have developed plans to reduce the number of flocks. Methods include startling the birds with loud noises, removing nesting material if no eggs are present in the nest, and relocating geese by trained animal personnel. Interestingly, Canada geese are a federally protected animal and killing this bird or destroying its eggs without a legal permit is a punishable offense.

So, if you are at the beach with children, you can point out geese feces to them with instructions to stay away, and can tell them not to place their hands or fingers into their mouths while they are playing on the beach. Also, they need to wash their hands after leaving the beach and, even more importantly, before eating.

If you are concerned about this as a public health issue, you can contact your municipal public health department, or county or state Department of Health and Human Services. You can inquire about what they are doing to deter Canada geese in a specific location from nesting, and also what they are doing about cleaning up the waste. Hopefully your watchful eye will keep you and your local beach-goers *cryptosporidium*-free.

Alice!
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