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,

Oh geese, a poop infested beach doesn’t sound too pleasant. While Canada geese feces can be hazardous to humans, it typically has to be inhaled or ingested to negatively impact a person’s health. This is because many health risks associated with Canada geese feces arise from the parasites and bacteria within them, not the feces themselves. For the average healthy person, it’s generally safe to walk past or lounge nearby these feces. However, not everyone can easily combat these parasites and bacteria, and thus might develop uncomfortable and sometimes life-threatening illnesses. As such, if a person who’s been exposed to geese feces falls ill shortly after, it's best for them to see their health care provider to get appropriate treatment.

Geese feces typically contain a number of pathogens which may come into contact with people and pose varying health risks depending on the person. Common parasites within geese feces include cryptosporidium and giardia. Likewise, common bacteria may include methicillin-resistant staphylococcus aureus (MRSA), Escherichia coli (E. coli), coliform, and campylobacter. These parasites and bacteria might come into contact with humans through direct or indirect contact with geese feces and through consumption of meat from infected animals. That said, direct contact is significantly less likely to introduce these pathogens to people, unless they are directly touching dead geese. However, the elderly, children, people who are immunocompromised, have gastrointestinal (GI) issues, or are pregnant or breastfeeding may be particularly susceptible to health risks posed by these pathogens. As such, it’s safest practice for people to avoid geese feces altogether to minimize their health risks.

Of all the pathogens within geese feces, cryptosporidium poses the most serious health hazard since it causes cryptosporidiosis in humans. People with cryptosporidiosis are likely to experience watery stools, dehydration, stomach pain, weight loss, fever, and vomiting. These
symptoms typically manifest within a week of infection and may last up to two weeks. Additionally, this infection might become serious if untreated since dehydration may set in, especially for people who can’t easily combat this parasite. As a result, if someone has GI distress for more than a couple of days, they may find it most helpful to check-in with their health care providers.

Since cryptosporidium is most commonly spread through water (a place geese like to hang out), many cities and municipalities in the United States have established rigorous water monitoring programs to protect their residents. These efforts were largely inspired by a 1993 outbreak of cryptosporidium in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, which resulted in 400,000 people falling ill and 100 deaths. Yet, despite this epidemic and scientific evidence on the risks posed by cryptosporidium, water monitoring programs remain largely unstandardized across the country; while many areas have implemented programs to prevent future epidemics, others haven’t and therefore remain vulnerable to being parasitic contamination. As such, depending on where you are, your likelihood for being infected by cryptosporidium can vary.

Beyond water monitoring programs, some places in the U.S. have chosen to reduce the risk of pathogenic infections by decreasing the number of nearby geese flocks. Tactics are strategically not aggressive as Canada geese are federally protected animals, and killing them or destroying their eggs without a legal permit is a punishable offense. Some tactics 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.

With all this said, the next time you’re at the beach, you may wish to advise people to minimize their contact with or completely avoid geese feces. You can specifically suggest that children not place their hands or fingers in their mouths while they’re playing on the beach, and that they wash their hands before eating and after leaving the beach. If you’re still concerned about the amount of feces in the area, you may wish to contact your municipal, county, or state public health department. Through these agencies, you can inquire about any current efforts to deter Canada geese by the beach and clean up existing waste. If you’re particularly concerned, you may also want to find other places to spend time outdoors away from the beach, such as parks, hiking trails, or a different beach.

Hopefully your watchful eye will keep you and your local beach-goers disease-free!

Alice!

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