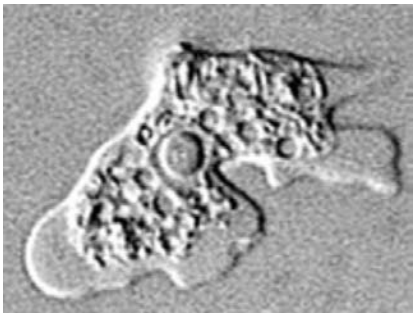
Louisiana public water system has brain-eating amoeba

The (Shreveport, La.) Times



Story Highlights

- At least 3 children this summer contracted infection in 3 states when water went up their noses
- 2 boys died; a 12-year-old girl was released from the hospital Sept. 11
- About 130 people in the USA have been infected in 50 years; only 2 have lived

Adequate amounts of chlorine kill the parasite.

BATON ROUGE, La. — The federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has confirmed the presence of a rare brain-eating amoeba in five test locations of a northwest Louisiana water system.

No known cases of illness related to the *Naegleria fowleri* amoeba have been reported this year in DeSoto Parish, where DeSoto Parish Waterworks District No. 1 in Grand Cane, La., had the contaminated specimens, the Louisiana Department of Health & Hospitals said Tuesday. The water system, one of 14 in the parish, was tested because the area had one of two *Naegleria fowleri*-related deaths in the state in 2011.

Beginning Wednesday, the water system, which serves almost 5,000 customers, started flushing its pipes with additional chlorine for the next 60 days to kill the amoeba.

"We are working closely with the water system and parish officials to ensure that the chlorine levels are increased to a level that will eliminate the risk of exposure to the amoeba," said J.T. Lane, the department's assistant secretary in the Office of Public Health. "Water from the DeSoto Parish Water Works District No. 1 remains safe to drink."

When water containing *Naegleria fowleri* amoeba gets in a person's nose, the amoeba can travel up the sinuses to the brain, causing primary amoebic meningoencephalitis, which is almost always fatal. The amoeba occur naturally around the world and live in warm bodies of fresh water.

• This year, Zachary Reyna, 12, of LaBelle, Fla., contracted the parasitic infection and died about three weeks later from brain damage.

• A 4-year-old Mississippi boy, whose name has not been released, also died in August after contracting the infection the month before while visiting the Violet, La., area and allowing contaminated water from a a Slip 'n Slide to go up his nose.

• A 12-year-old girl, Kali Hardig of Benton, Ark., was infected July 19; she survived and was released from the hospital Sept. 11.

Almost 130 people have contracted primary amoebic meningoencephalitis in the past 50 years and only one other besides Kali have survived, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Thirty-one infections were reported from 2003 to 2012, and all were fatal.

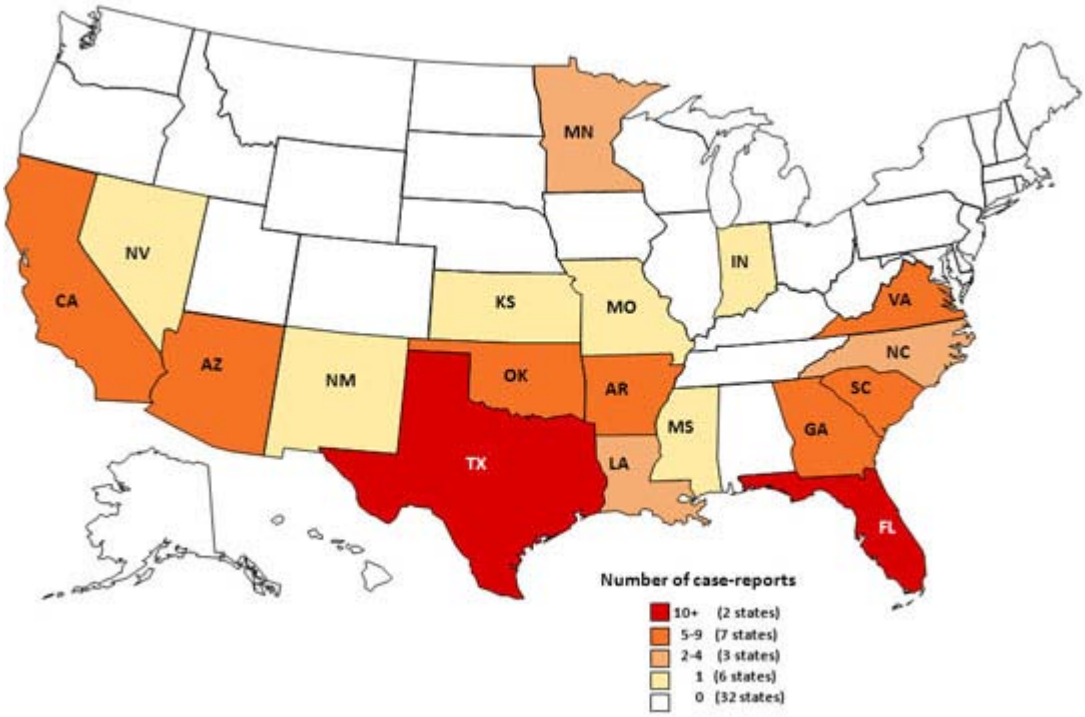
Exposure to *Naegleria fowleri* historically has occurred as a result of swimming or diving in warm freshwater lakes and rivers; that's how Kali and Zachary were infected. An infection from Naegleria fowleri cannot occur when a person drinks water because stomach acid will kill the amoeba.

"Families can take simple steps to protect themselves from exposure to this amoeba, the most important being to avoid allowing water to go up your nose while bathing or swimming in a pool," said Jimmy Guidry, Louisiana state health officer.

At the time of the 2011 deaths in DeSoto and St. Bernard parishes, officials could confirm the presence of the amoeba only in the homes of the deceased but not in the water systems. More advanced sampling technology is now available, so the water was tested.

Test results released Sept. 13 on the St. Bernard Parish water system where the 4-year-old died confirmed the amoeba in the public water system in Violet and Arabi, La., as well. The pipes in that water district were flushed with additional chlorine beginning in September.

Primary amoebic meningoencephalitis cases, 1962 to 2012



Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

Help protect yourself

Infections most often occur in July, August and September when temperatures are high for prolonged periods. *Naegleria fowleri* amoeba can be found in the following places:

• Warm fresh water such as lakes and rivers
• Geothermal water such as hot springs and drinking water sources
• Warm water discharge from industrial plants

To lower your risk, hold your nose shut, use nose clips or keep your head above water when playing in bodies of warm fresh water.

If you use a neti pot to flush your sinuses, boil the tap water for 1 to 3 minutes, buy distilled or sterile water, or filter the water using a filter with a pore size of 1 micron or smaller. *Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention*