Canals may not look enticing now but when we are in the dog days of summer and the temperatures are peaking towards triple digits that will change. Canals are like magnets, attracting young people into their deadly disguise of a fun place to beat the heat.

Irrigation canals contain both visible and invisible hazards. Most of us are aware of the visible dangers such as high water levels, extremely cold temperatures, fast-moving flows, steep banks, and being trapped by debris. Canal hazards contribute to an average of three children drowning in Idaho each year. However, drowning is not the only risk people take by swimming in canals.

Irrigation water contains higher levels of contaminants than other surface water. As the water travels farther down the canal system towards Western Treasure Valley, it accumulates even more contaminants and more risks. Most often, such contaminants are not visible to the naked eye.

Many of us may not consider the health risks associated with invisible contaminants. People often ignore the dangers when they say, “I swam in a canal when I was younger and nothing happened to me”—so awareness is needed for all ages.

While swimming or playing in canal water it is possible to ingest feces, pesticides, insecticides, and other toxins that may make us ill or even have fatal consequences.

The most common illness is diarrhea, which can be caused by germs such as *Cryptosporidium* (*Crypto*), *Giardia*, *Shigella*, *norovirus*, and *E.coli 0157:H7*. Other infections may involve the skin, ears, respiratory, eyes, urinary tract, and open wounds.

If you irrigate with canal water, the health risks may extend to your yard as well. You should not allow children to run through sprinklers or fountains; fill backyard pools; or drink from garden hoses supplied with water from irrigation canals. It doesn’t take a large amount of contaminated water to make us ill and children may be even more susceptible than adults.

As parents, it is our responsibility to teach our children that canals are not recreational areas. We need to stress the deadly hazards they contain—both visible and invisible. Have fun, stay cool, and be safe this summer, but don’t risk exposing your children to the dangers of swimming or playing in canal water!