

US EPA ARCHIVE DOCUMENT

**EPA Before You
Go to the Beach ...**



Is the Water Safe for Swimming?

The water at the beach looks clean, but is it? It may be worth your while to find out before you or your children go swimming. Most water at beaches is safe for swimming. However, you cannot be sure the beach water is safe unless it is tested because your beach water may contain disease-causing microorganisms that you cannot see.

Monitoring of beach water quality by local health and environmental officials is necessary to warn citizens when there is a problem. The United States Environmental Protection Agency's new BEACH Program (Beaches Environmental Assessment, Closure, and Health Program) is designed to help your local government officials provide you with information necessary to protect your health.

How Does Beach Pollution Affect You and Your Family?

Water can be polluted by different things. Trash, such as picnic plates, plastic bags and bottles, and cigarette butts is easy to see. It is often the things we can't see, such as bacteria and other microorganisms, that we need to be more concerned about. If you or your family are exposed to these disease-causing organisms, they may make you sick.

Swimming or playing in unsafe water may result in minor illnesses such as sore throats or diarrhea. It also might result in more serious illnesses that may last longer than your vacation at the beach! Children, the elderly and people with weakened immune systems have a greater chance of getting sick when they come in contact with contaminated water.

Where Does This Pollution Come From?

The most frequent sources of disease-causing microorganisms are from sewage overflows, polluted storm water runoff, sewage treatment plant malfunctions, boating wastes and malfunctioning septic systems.

Pollution in beach water is often much higher during and immediately after rainstorms because water draining into the beach may be carrying sewage from overflowing sewage treatment systems. Rainwater also flows to our beaches after running off lawns, farms, streets, construction sites, and other urban areas, picking up animal waste, fertilizer, pesticides, trash and many other pollutants. Many of these pollutants can end up in the water at our beaches.



DISEASE-CAUSING MICROORGANISMS IN SEWAGE

Microorganisms	Some Illnesses and Symptoms
Bacteria	Gastroenteritis (includes diarrhea and abdominal pain), salmonellosis (food poisoning), cholera.
Viruses	Fever, common colds, gastroenteritis, diarrhea, respiratory infections, hepatitis.
Protozoa	Gastroenteritis, cryptosporidiosis and giardiasis (including diarrhea and abdominal cramps), dysentery.
Worms	Digestive disturbances, vomiting, restlessness, coughing, chest pain, fever, diarrhea.

BEACH Program

The BEACH Program will help reduce health risks to you and your family by minimizing your exposure to disease-causing microorganisms in the water where you swim or play. The BEACH Program is ensuring public access to information about the quality of their beach water. In addition, EPA is working with state, tribal and local health and environmental officials to encourage use of faster tests to detect pollution as well as develop methods that will help predict when pollution may occur. With advance warning provided by the local authorities, you will be able to decide when and where to swim.

How Do I Get Information about My Beach?

State, tribal, and local health and environmental protection officials are responsible for monitoring the quality of water at our nation's beaches. When they find a beach is contaminated they may post warnings or close the beach. Your local public health or environmental office can tell you if and when the water at your beach is monitored, who does it, and where the results are posted. Check with EPA's "Beach Watch" website at <http://www.epa.gov/OST/beaches> or contact your city, county or other local health officials listed in your local telephone book.

For Additional Information about BEACH

For additional information about the BEACH Program, contact the U.S. EPA, Office of Water, Office of Science and Technology at:

401 M Street, S.W., Washington, D.C. 20460,
E-Mail: OWGENERAL@epamail.epa.gov
or visit EPA's Beach Watch website at
<http://www.epa.gov/OST/beaches>

Questions to Ask Your Local Beach Health Monitoring Official:

- Which beaches do you monitor and how often?
- What do you test for?
- Where can I see the test results and who can explain them to me?
- What are the primary sources of pollution that affect this beach?

What to Do if Your Beach is Not Monitored Regularly:

- Avoid swimming after a heavy rain.
- Look for storm drains (pipes that drain polluted water from streets) along the beach. Don't swim near them.
- Look for trash and other signs of pollution such as oil slicks in the water. These kinds of pollutants may indicate the presence of disease-causing microorganisms that may also have been washed into the water.
- If you think your beach water is contaminated, contact your local health or environmental protection officials. It is important for them to know about suspected beach water contamination so they can protect citizens from exposure.
- Work with your local authorities to create a monitoring program.