Healthy Beaches Program

Frequently Asked Questions

1. Why monitor Saskatchewan's beaches?

Beaches are monitored to protect swimmers from illnesses associated with unacceptable levels of *E. coli* and microcystin (a toxin produced by blue-green algae).

The water sampling program follows the Canadian Recreational Water Quality Guidelines and aligns with practices used across other jurisdictions in Canada.

2. How are the beaches (or recreational areas) chosen for sampling?

Priority beaches are selected for routine monitoring based on factors such as high public use, historical water quality concerns, and their designation as public swimming areas. These beaches, which may include recreational swimming sites at camps, provincial and regional parks, and other public areas across the province. Private beachfront properties are not included in the monitoring program.

3. How often are beaches sampled?

From June through August, water samples are collected and analyzed weekly or every two weeks at selected public beaches across Saskatchewan, including Regina Beach, Echo Lake, and Pike Lake.

4. Why are blue-green algae a health concern?

Some blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) can produce microcystin, a toxin that may accumulate during algal blooms and pose health risks. Recreational water users should avoid areas with visible blooms or scum. Contact with or ingestion of affected water can be harmful. A cleansing shower and washing of exposed items are recommended as soon as possible after water exposure.

5. What causes an algal bloom?

No single factor causes a blue-green algae bloom. Blooms are more likely to occur during hot, sunny weather, in calm water that is rich in phosphorus and nitrogen.

6. What happens if I'm exposed to blue-green algae blooms?

Contact with blue-green algae can cause skin and eye irritation, allergic reactions, or rashes. Swallowing contaminated water can lead to symptoms such as nausea, vomiting, diarrhea, and stomach cramps. If you experience any health effects after exposure, seek medical attention.

7. Is it safe to drink water that has blue-green algae in it? Can I cook or bathe in the water?

No. Do not drink, cook with or bathe in untreated water that may be contaminated with blue-green algae, as its toxins are invisible, odourless, and tasteless.

Boiling water does not remove blue-green algae toxins; in fact, it can cause the cells to rupture, potentially releasing more toxins into the water. Avoid using water from areas with blue-green algae blooms on edible plants, as the toxins can contaminate produce and make it unsafe to eat.

8. Is it safe to eat fish caught in waters with blue-green algae blooms?

Fish caught from an area with a blue-green algae bloom may be eaten in moderation. However, avoid eating the internal organs, fat, and skin, as toxins can accumulate in these parts. Always clean the fish thoroughly and rinse fillets with clean water before cooking.

9. What precautions should be taken when an algae bloom is present?

- Avoid contact with water under a swimming advisory or where algae blooms or surface scum are visible - even if an advisory has not been issued;
- If you've been in contact with a bloom, rinse off with clean water or shower as soon as possible;
- Wash clothing, swimwear, and gear that has come into contact with blue-green algae;
- Keep children from swimming in or drinking water where algae is present;
- Avoid water activities like water skiing, tubing, or wakesurfing in areas with visible algae;
- Do not use water contaminated with blue-green algae for watering lawns, gardens, or crops;
- Prevent pets and livestock from entering or drinking affected water. Animals are less able to recognize and avoid contaminated water, putting them at a higher risk of serious illness or death.

10. What is Swimmer's Itch?

Swimmer's Itch is a skin rash caused by parasitic flatworms (*schistosomes*) found in lakes and ponds across Canada. These parasites usually infect birds or animals, not people, and cause temporary skin irritation.

11. How do I contract Swimmer's Itch?

You can get Swimmer's Itch by swimming or wading in water where the parasites are present. These parasites come from bird droppings, grow inside snails, and are released into the water when the snails let them out as part of their life cycle. If the parasites encounter your skin, they can cause an itchy rash.

Swimmer's Itch is not contagious. The parasites cannot survive in people, and the rash doesn't spread from person to person.

12. What are the symptoms of Swimmer's Itch?

Symptoms can include:

- tingling, burning, or itching of the skin;
- small reddish pimples; and,
- small blisters.

13. How do I prevent Swimmer's Itch?

- Stay out of shallow waters with lots of plants, as they may have parasites.
- Swim instead of playing or wading in shallow water to lower the risk.
- Dry off quickly with a towel right after leaving the water to prevent a rash.
- Take a cleansing shower right after swimming to minimize the risk.
- Avoid feeding birds at the beach to help prevent the spread of parasites.

14. What is *E. coli*?

E. coli (*Escherichia coli*) is an intestinal bacterium found in humans and other mammals. When released into the environment, it can contaminate food and water. There are many strains, or types, of *E. coli*. While most are harmless, some strains can cause severe illness and long-term health complications.

The presence of *E. coli* in water indicates fecal contamination, which can come from sources like sewage overflows, storm water runoff, and animal waste. This contamination poses health risks, which is why *E. coli* is monitored in beach water quality tests.

15. What health risks are associated with *E. coli*?

Common symptoms of *E. coli* exposure include stomach upset, skin rashes, wound infections, sore throats, and eye and ear infections. Certain strains can lead to serious complications such as bloody diarrhea, kidney failure, or, in rare cases, death. Those most at risk include young children, the elderly, and individuals with weakened immune systems.

16. What are the common sources of E. coli contamination in lakes?

Heavy rainstorms can carry animal feces from pets and wildlife into rivers, and lakes contaminating the water.

E. coli from sources like storm sewers, farm manure runoff, aging sanitary sewer systems, leaky sewage tanks, and other wastewater infrastructure can seep or drain into rivers and lakes.

E. coli can thrive in beach sand. Beachgoers and waves can transfer the bacteria from sand into the water, increasing the risk of exposure and infection for swimmers.

17. When are swimming advisories posted at beaches?

When water quality test results indicate potential health risks, public health officials may issue an advisory. In such cases, the public is advised to avoid swimming and other in-water activities. Advisory signs are posted at multiple locations around the affected beach and remain in place until resampling confirms water quality has returned to acceptable levels.

18. If the water isn't safe for swimming, is it still safe to visit the beach?

A swimming advisory applies only to water quality and does not mean the beach is closed. Visitors can still enjoy onshore activities, but young children and pets should be closely supervised to prevent contact with the water.

19. If there's a swimming advisory, can my dog still go in the water, or is it dangerous for them too?

Pets should not enter water that appears discoloured or may contain blue-green algae, whether or not advisory signs are posted. If your pet does go in, rinse them thoroughly with clean, fresh water to reduce the risk of toxin exposure.

20. If the water isn't safe for swimming, isn't there a risk going on the lake for boating/sailing and falling into the water?

Swimming advisories apply only to specific monitored public beach areas and may not reflect conditions across the entire lake. Most on-water activities (like boating, kayaking, or sailing) are not affected, especially when done away from posted advisory areas. However, water contact should still be avoided in areas with visible algae.

21. There is an advisory at the beach but not on the website. Which is correct?

If there's an advisory posted at the beach but not yet on the website, the signage at the beach is correct. Sometimes, water quality results requiring an advisory received after regular office hours and may not be reflected online right away.

22. What happens after a caution or advisory is posted at a beach?

After a caution or advisory is posted, water quality continues to be monitored. The advisory is lifted once follow-up sampling confirms that conditions have returned to safe levels for recreational use.

23. Why can't I find my beach on the list?

The Healthy Beaches program began in 2012, and since then, all known public beaches under provincial jurisdiction have been assessed at least once. Selected beaches are chosen for monitoring based on factors such as high public use, historical water quality concerns, and their designation as public swimming areas. Only the sampling results for these selected beaches are posted online. Other public beaches may be sampled on a complaint basis.

24. Where can I find more information about the Healthy Beaches program and current beach sampling results?

For more information about the Healthy Beaches program, including beach water sampling results, visit the Government of Saskatchewan's Healthy Beaches Program webpage: https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/environment-public-health-and-safety/environmental-health/healthy-beach-program

25. Who can I contact for more information?

For more information about the Healthy Beaches program, contact a Public Health Inspector with the Saskatchewan Health Authority. A list of local offices is available here: https://www.saskhealthauthority.ca/your-health/conditions-diseases-services/contact-your-public-health-inspector