

Healthy Beaches: Protect Yourself from *E. coli* (*Escherichia coli*)

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.



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.

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 sewer systems, leaky septic tanks, and other wastewater infrastructure issues can seep or drain into rivers and lakes.
- *E. coli* can thrive in beach sand, where wave action or beachgoers may transfer the bacteria from sand into the water, increasing the risk of exposure and infection for swimmers.

How does the climate affect *E. coli* levels in lakes?

- Increased air and water temperatures promote the growth of *E. coli*.
- Increasingly frequent and severe storms create runoff from urban areas, farms, and other sources, carrying *E. coli* into water bodies.
- Heavy rainfall and flooding can overwhelm sewage systems, allowing untreated sewage to spill into water bodies and raise *E. coli* levels.

What can I do to prevent my family and me from getting sick?

- Look out for advisory signs at public beaches and do not swim when signs are posted.
- Take a cleansing shower with warm water and soap after swimming in a lake.
- Wash clothes, towels, and other swimming gear that were in contact with lake water.
- Avoid swallowing lake water while swimming.
- Monitor children closely to prevent them from accidentally swallowing lake water.
- If you experience symptoms of illness after swimming, seek medical attention.
- Fish from lakes with common *E. coli* levels are generally safe to eat if rinsed in clean water and cooked to an internal temperature of 145°F (63°C).

Natural waterbodies, such as lakes, rivers, and ponds are untreated, open bodies of water that are subject to contamination and may pose risks to public health. Public Health Inspectors address water quality concerns to mitigate risks as quickly as possible.

If a public beach is under an *E. coli* advisory, consider visiting a nearby public swimming pool instead. It provides a safe and enjoyable option for your swimming activities.

Stay informed. Visit the Healthy Beaches website to view water quality reports before heading to the beach: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/environment-public-health-and-safety/environmental-health/healthy-beach-program>

For more information, contact your local public health inspection office. A list of offices can be found here: <https://www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/health/public-health/public-health-inspectors>