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Beach Water Quality in Metro Vancouver Area – Frequently Asked Questions

How can I protect myself when swimming at the beach?

- Avoid swallowing water
- Avoid swimming with an open cut or wound
- Avoid swimming for 48-hours after a significant rainfall
- Avoid swimming in murky/turbid water
- Stay away from the water if you are experiencing digestive or intestinal problems
- After swimming, wash your hands before handling food

What should I do after swimming in beach water?

After swimming, rinse off well using soap and clean water, paying special attention to any cuts or scrapes. Dry out your ears.

If you believe you have been exposed to contaminated water, take a shower and wash swimsuits, towels and other clothing that might have been contaminated as soon as possible. If you start to feel sick, seek medical attention. Tell your doctor that you think you were exposed to contaminated water, and contact your local health authority to report your illness.

Who does the sampling and testing?

Beach owners/operators are responsible for collecting their own water samples but may make arrangements for others to do so. In the lower mainland, Metro Vancouver performs the sampling for the beach operators. Samples are sent to an approved laboratory for analysis. VCH reviews the results and then posts on this website.

How often is water quality tested at beaches?

Beach owners/operators should routinely test beach water quality during the swimming season from April to September. While most beaches are tested each week, remote beaches are not always able to meet this recommended frequency.

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What does the lab look for in the beach water?

Beach water is tested for the presence of E. coli, a bacterium commonly found in the intestinal tract of animals and humans.

What does it mean when the E. coli counts are high?

High counts of E. coli in recreational water may increase the chances of gastrointestinal, upper respiratory illnesses, and skin/eye infection.

What does "resampling in progress" mean?

When the single sample limit of ≤400 E. coli/100mL is exceeded, a resample protocol is initiated. The beach operator will be requested to take the re-sample as soon as possible.

What happens when the E. coli counts exceed limits?

The Guidelines for Canadian Recreational Water Quality recommends the use of two limits for E. coli. A geometric mean of ≤ 200 E. coli/100 mL based on the previous five samples and a single sample limit of ≤ 400 E. coli/100 mL. When either of these limits is exceeded an assessment will be made to determine next steps. In the case of a single sample exceedance, the first step will be to re-sample. Should results remain high, beach operators may be required to post a notice at the beach, "No Swimming", which includes all primary contact recreation activities.

What does it mean when a "No Swimming" advisory is posted at a beach?

The level of E. coli bacteria found in the water is above the recommended guidelines. When the level of bacteria is higher there is an increased risk of illness to swimmers. The public is advised not to swim or wade in the water until the advisory is removed. Seniors, infants and children and people with weakened immunity are the most susceptible.

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Will I get sick if I go into water that is under advisory?

There is no way to say for sure whether or not you will get sick if you go into water that is under advisory, but you will have a higher chance of getting sick. The risk of getting sick is higher if you swallow water or get water in the nose, eyes, ears or an open wound. Examples of possible illness include stomach upset, ear infection, sore throat, or wound infection.

When does an advisory end?

When tests show that the beach water quality has returned to an acceptable level, the advisory will be removed. Beach operators will be notified that the beach is suitable for swimming. Signage will be removed from beaches. Results will be updated online on this webpage.

What is the source of the E. coli contamination?

There are many possible sources of E.coli contamination. Storm water runoff can include contamination from recreational vehicles, animal waste and sewer overflows. Other possible sources are leaking septic tanks and discharge from boats. Heavy rain is often a factor contributing to poor beach water quality. Bacteria levels can be elevated after heavy rainfall and people are advised to avoid swimming at the beach for at least 48 hours.

What is primary contact recreation?

Swimming, paddle boarding, surfing, or any activity in which the whole body can be immersed and water will likely be swallowed.

What is secondary contact recreation?

These are activities that result in regular wetting of limbs but swallowing of water is not usual. Such activities include canoeing, kayaking, sailing and fishing.

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What is the risk from secondary recreational water activities?

The level of E.coli contamination at which health risks occur from secondary contact recreation activities is unclear. Caution should be taken to avoid swallowing water. Afterwards wash with soap and clean water particularly prior to eating.

What are reference sites?

These are sites where the water quality is monitored, but is not suitable for swimming because of a number of possible factors including: poor water quality, tidal action, marine traffic or a hazardous underwater environment. Since the water may be used for secondary contact recreation, the data is provided to the public for information purposes only.

Why are beaches closed?

This is different than a water quality advisory; the following are examples of events that could lead to closure of the beach:

- Chemical, oil, sewage or other waste spills
- Waste water treatment plant bypasses
- Red tides or blue green algae blooms;
- Fish or other wildlife die-off at the beach
- Visible debris, metal, or sharp objects found in the water or beach area

No one should swim at a beach that has been closed.

Why do some beaches not have a geometric mean?

The number of samples collected by the beach operator is not sufficient to calculate a geometric mean. The beach remains open based on the available sample results.

Why is a beach missing from the map?

Beaches that are not routinely sampled are not shown on the map.

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Where can I find beach water quality information for my local beach?

Beach water quality reports are posted online at:
http://www.vch.ca/your-environment/water-quality/recreational-water/beach-water-quality-report/
E. coli counts for local beaches will be updated as results become available.