

HEALTH

Best Ways to Stay Healthy Swimming at Beaches and Pools

Experts offer advice on avoiding bacterial and viral infections

By [Brette Sember](#) August 8, 2019



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There's still several weeks of summer left, and what's better than cooling off at the beach or pool on a hot day? Yet, as we've seen in the national news in recent months, your refreshing dip could actually make you sick.

There are 90 million cases of recreational water illnesses each year in the U.S., caused by germs and toxins, [according to research by the School of Public Health at the University of Illinois](#).

Fortunately, it's possible to [enjoy the beach or pool](#) and stay healthy, if you're informed and careful.

Scary Swimming News vs. Actual Risks

Among some of the frightening national news of swimming-related deaths this summer were reports of [deadly flesh-eating bacteria \(Vibrio vulnificus\)](#) at ocean beaches. Although the media reports are alarming, Dr. Alan Taege, an infectious disease specialist at the Cleveland Clinic, says it's very rare for people to become sick from this bacteria.

"It is more common in older people with other conditions (diabetes, liver cirrhosis, cancer, alcoholism or cancers) and may occur after surgery," Taege says. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) also lists people with [HIV or who take medication to reduce stomach acid](#) as being at higher risk.

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Prevention is the best safety tip related to V. vulnificus. If you have any open wounds, cuts or scrapes, stay out of the water or use a waterproof bandage. If you're walking at a rocky beach, wear clothing and shoes to protect your skin from cuts. And if you do have a cut exposed to ocean water, wash it with soap and fresh water after you get out.

In another scary report related to swimming, a man died from a [brain-eating amoeba \(Naegleria fowleri\)](#) after swimming in a lake in Cumberland County, N.C. in July. This type of organism is found in fresh, warm water, primarily in southern states. Swallowing water with the amoeba in it will not cause an infection. However, if water goes up the nose, the organism can enter the brain and destroy brain tissue.

Taege says these amoebas are rare, but fatal. If you're going to swim in places where N. fowleri might be present, he recommends wearing nose plugs.

Beach Pollution Is the Real Health Concern

Extremely rare bacteria and amoebas aside, more common bacterial contamination from human and animal waste is really the major health risk at fresh and salt water beaches. [In a study conducted by the Environment America Research and Policy Center and the Frontier Group](#), researchers looked at 2018 water testing data for 4,523 beach sites in 29 coastal and Great Lakes states. Of those sites, 2,627 had bacteria levels indicating potentially unsafe levels of fecal contamination for swimming on at least one day during the year.

Rebecca Hammer, deputy director of federal water policy at the Natural Resources Defense Council explains, "The main public health concern at beaches is bacteria pollution, which typically occurs during and after rainstorms. Rain can cause sewage systems to overflow and urban runoff containing animal waste and other pollutants to be washed off developed lands into waterways."

After such events, [people are more at risk](#) of getting gastrointestinal illnesses, as well as respiratory, eye and ear infections. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) recommends not swimming after a heavy rainfall, and visually checking the beach for pollutants before going in the water.

States are required to test the water quality at their beaches and submit it to the EPA, but not all beaches are tested. And those that are might not be checked regularly. Hammer recommends paying attention to any public health advisories at beaches.

One way to do this is through the ["Find a Beach" clickable map](#) on the EPA's website. Another source is the [Swim Guide](#), which offers a free app that will tell you if the water at your beach has been tested and what the results are.

Sandcastles May Not Be Safe

Health concerns at fresh and salt water beaches extend beyond the water. If you're playing in, or digging in, the sand (perhaps with grandkids), be aware there are germs in the sand.

[One study found that sand can harbor](#) salmonella, E. coli, giardia, campylobacter and norovirus — all of which can cause gastrointestinal symptoms — in higher levels than in the water itself. Being buried in the sand increases your risk of illness. The EPA recommends washing your hands with soap after playing with beach sand.

Algae Blooms Are Not Pretty

[Algae blooms are another cause of illness](#) in both fresh and salt water. Ocean algae blooms are sometimes called red tides. Algae can cause a variety of symptoms, including skin irritation, diarrhea and respiratory problems.

Algae blooms are often caused by pollution from runoff, highlighting again how important it is to be sure the water you're swimming in is regularly tested.

Public Pools: What to Know Before You Cannonball

Most people assume the water in public pools is safe because it's chlorinated. But public pools can be contaminated by human fecal matter [containing cryptosporidium](#), E. coli, giardia, shigella and norovirus, all of which cause diarrhea. [Outbreaks of cryptosporidium have been on the rise](#), according to the CDC.

Mary Ostrowski, senior director of chlorine issues for the American Chemistry Council, points out that most pathogens in pool water are killed by chlorine within seconds or minutes. "Cryptosporidium, however, can live for days in normally chlorinated pool water," she says. "Cryptosporidium must be treated with elevated chlorine levels (with all bathers out of the pool) or secondary disinfection technologies, such as ozone or ultraviolet light to destroy the parasite."

The best way to avoid getting sick from pool water is to keep your mouth closed. And to keep from infecting others, always shower ([just a one-minute shower will remove most germs](#)) before you get in. If you have diarrhea, [wait two weeks after the illness stops](#) before getting into a public pool.

Tips for Staying Healthy When Swimming

- **Practice common sense.** Read and heed warnings about water conditions, and don't go in the water if you are advised not to do so. Look at the water and evaluate how clean it looks. Avoid going in if you have open cuts. Avoid swallowing water at a beach or pool. "If your health is not good, it may be best to avoid beaches," Taege says.
- **Pay attention to wounds.** If you get a cut while swimming at a beach, clean the wound and keep an eye on it for signs of infection. Taege also recommends that swimmers "shower and wash hands after swimming in a pool, ocean or lake to remove salt, soil, bacteria or toxins."
- **Protect your ears.** [Your ears also are vulnerable to infection from bacteria in any type of water](#), which can cause otitis externa, commonly known as swimmer's ear. Wear earplugs or a bathing cap to protect your ears when you swim. After you swim, completely dry your ears and tip your head, gently pull on your earlobes or use a hair dryer on a low heat setting several inches from your ears to get all the water out.

These tips will help you stay healthy at the beach or pool during these last weeks of summer. While reports of illnesses can make a person want to avoid swimming altogether, Taege reminds that, "Odds are in your favor that you should be fine."



By [Brette Sember](#)

[Brette Sember](#) is the author of many books about divorce, child custody, business, health, food, and travel. She writes online content and does indexing and editing.

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