

# Maine Healthy Beaches (MHB) Program Advisory Fact Sheet



The MHB Program conducts weekly testing of recreational coastal waters during the swimming season and provides information to communities about their water quality.



## What is an advisory?

An advisory posted on an MHB Program sign at the beach or on the website is a recommendation to the public to avoid water contact activities in those areas. Advisories are posted where bacteria results exceed the water quality standards for recreational water contact established by U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

## What causes an exceedance of EPA's standards for recreational water quality?

The EPA established bacteria indicator for marine recreational water, *Enterococci*, indicates fecal contamination and the possible presence of disease-causing organisms. Sources of fecal contamination may include malfunctioning septic systems, sewage treatment plant or collection system malfunctions, agricultural runoff, pet or wildlife waste, boating waste, and poor sanitary practices at the beach. Contaminated runoff from the land may enter the beach area via rivers, streams, and storm drains, especially during wet weather conditions.

## What are the EPA's water quality standards for recreational water contact?

EPA's approved bacterial standards for recreational water quality are based on epidemiological studies investigating the probability of contracting an illness from contact with contaminated water. These studies established a strong relationship between *Enterococci* bacteria and gastrointestinal illness. The standard criteria for a single marine water quality sample is **104** most probable number of *Enterococci* per 100 milliliters of sample water.

## How current is the water quality data that is posted?

The EPA-approved method of analyzing recreational water quality used by the MHB Program provides results approximately 28 to 32 hours after the sample is collected. The dynamic nature of the coastal environment means that water quality conditions have the potential to change throughout the day; therefore, the posted beach status may not reflect current water quality conditions or the current risk for contracting recreational water-borne illnesses (RWIs). Not swimming following significant rainfall, and washing hands and showering following water contact may reduce such risk.

## Can I swim or wade if there is an advisory?

It is recommended to avoid all water contact activities when an advisory is in place. Risk of illness can result from contacting the water in multiple ways including ingestion of water while swimming, getting water in the nose, eyes, or ears, or entry through an open wound. Avoid water contact during and at least 24 to 48 hours following a significant rain event. The impact of rainfall will vary depending on the beach area.

**What is an indicator organism?**  
Indicator bacteria are used to determine water quality conditions. An indicator organism is one used to determine the presence of pathogenic (disease causing) organisms that might be present in the same environment as the indicator. The actual pathogenic organisms are too many, too difficult and costly to measure.

### **Will I get sick if I go into the water when there is an advisory or closure posted?**

There is *always* a potential risk of contracting an RWI when the water is contaminated; however each individual has varying tolerances and immunity levels. When bacteria levels exceed the established criteria, or conditions at the beach increase pollution levels, there is an *increased* probability of contracting an illness.

### **What are the symptoms of a Recreational Water Borne Illness (RWI)?**

RWI symptoms may include: nausea, diarrhea, stomach cramps, chills, and fever. Skin rashes and infections of the eyes, ears, nose and throat may also occur. If you experience any of these symptoms, you should contact your physician and report any recreational water derived illnesses to the Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention Hotline (24/7): 1-800-821-5821.

### **How long does an advisory last?**

A beach advisory lasts until sampling results are within the EPA's standards for recreational water contact, or when conditions at the beach no longer pose a health risk. Once the initial sample results are recorded into the Maine Healthy Beaches database, an alert is sent out to the local Beach Manager and a resample is scheduled. When necessary, the sampling frequency is increased until the results are "clean," prompting the removal of an advisory. Check with the local Beach Manager for the most current conditions and beach status.

### **Can I still use a beach that is under advisory?**

A beach advisory still allows the public to recreate at the beach, but advises them to avoid water contact due to the possibility of illness.

### **Is an advisory posted for the entire beach?**

Advisories are posted for an entire beach or separate beach management areas when routine monitoring reveals elevated levels of *Enterococci* bacteria. A **beach management area** is defined either as an entire beach or a segment of a beach that is managed independently from other segments. Each beach management area has its own beach sign and is listed separately on the MHB website ([www.mainehealthybeaches.org](http://www.mainehealthybeaches.org)).



### **What is a closure?**

A closure, more severe than an advisory, can be based on chronic bacteria results or when conditions greatly increase pollution levels. While it is rare in Maine to have closures, they are generally linked to known safety hazards. For example, a beach may be closed as a result of: sewage treatment plant malfunctions, severe flooding, rip currents, sharks, hazardous surf conditions, and other safety hazards. A municipality must have a specific ordinance in place to close a beach and may have the ability to keep people out of the water or close the beach to usage.

**For more information visit our website: [www.MaineHealthyBeaches.org](http://www.MaineHealthyBeaches.org)**

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