



# Environmental Health Summer Beach Program

## Frequently Asked Questions

### 1. What is changing about the beach monitoring program?

Permanent signs will be posted at public beaches across the Health Unit district, in lieu of routine water sampling, so all beachgoers can be aware of what steps they can take to reduce their risk of illness or injury.

### 2. Why is routine water sampling being discontinued?

Routine beach water sampling was not providing timely or reliable information for swimmers. Limitations included:

- Lab results arrived too slowly to provide useful information for swimmers.
- The water was only tested about 3 times each summer. This is not often enough to address quickly changing conditions.
- The Health Unit district is large and contains many public beaches; limiting our ability to ensure all beaches were monitored.

By posting signs at every public beach, beachgoers get useful and easy-to-follow information about beach safety each time they visit a beach.

### 3. Is swimming at local beaches safe?

Yes. The overall risk of getting sick from swimming at local beaches is low. When people do get ill, it is usually mild and only lasts a couple of days. The most common illnesses are:

- minor skin infections;
- respiratory infections;
- gastrointestinal illness;
- ear or eye infections.



Evidence suggests that contact with sand, such as digging or getting sand in the mouth, is often a stronger predictor of illness than swimming in the water itself.

#### 4. How can I reduce my risk?

The risk of illness from a public beach is reduced if simple precautions are taken, such as:

- not swallowing water while swimming;
- avoiding swimming during or after a heavy rainfall or high winds;
- avoiding swimming when large numbers of birds are present;
- after swimming or playing in the sand, wash your hands before eating;
- avoid swimming with an open wound.

#### 5. Why use permanent beach signage instead of sampling results?

Our routine, in-person water sampling did not allow us to test beach water often enough to give the public reliable information about the water quality. A permanent sign at each public beach means you will receive in-the-moment useful info about the risks of using any public beach in our district, and what you can do to protect yourself.

#### 6. What is E. coli (Escherichia coli)?

E. coli is a germ that is commonly found in the feces of humans and animals. It is naturally found at beaches, and higher numbers of the bacteria are often found in water where there is untreated sewage, there are lots of birds, where there is stagnant water, or when the water or the sediment at the bottom of the lake or rivers is stirred up due to heavy rainfall or high wind.

While beach water testing looks only for E. coli, beaches can contain other bacteria, viruses, and other “germs” that may make people sick.

#### 7. What should people do if they are concerned about water quality?

Contact us at 705-474-1400 ext. 5400 if you feel there are unusual conditions causing water quality concerns at your local public beach. We will continue to respond to complaints, conduct sampling and investigations as appropriate, and take public health action when needed.



## 8. I don't see a sign at my local beach, are all beaches in the district meant to have a sign?

Signs are posted at public beaches, which are beaches that are owned or operated by a municipality and officially designated as public beaches.

Across the district, there are many lakes, shoreline areas or other public access points such as boat launches, where people have enjoyed swimming for many years. While these areas are open to the public, they are not always designated as public beaches and are not included in the beach signage program.

In some cases, signs may be temporarily missing due to weather, damage, or vandalism. If you are unsure whether a location is a designated public beach, or if you notice a missing sign, you can contact your municipality or the Health Unit for more information.

Wherever you choose to swim, it is always a good idea to follow general water safety tips to help protect your health.

## 9. What information will the new signs include?

The signs highlight:

- factors that increase risk (rain, wind, birds)
- visual indicators (cloudy water, debris, algae)
- steps to reduce your risk

Signs are available in English and French.





## 10. How does this approach align with provincial standards?

Posting clear signage at every location ensures the public receives timely, accessible information while keeping the program aligned with provincial standards.

## 11. How does this change affect municipalities?

We will be providing municipalities with standardized signs to be posted at public beaches. We will continue to work with municipal partners to respond to concerns and investigate complaints.

## 12. Will the Health Unit accept beach water samples collected by members of the public?

No. We do not offer sampling of beach water collected by members of the public. Recreational water sampling has a specific purpose and must be conducted using standardized methods, locations, and timing to support a public health assessment.

Environmental factors such as rainfall, wind, and aquatic bird activity can cause bacterial levels to change quickly, meaning results from a single sample may no longer be relevant by the time they are known. For this reason, individual samples are not an effective way to assess swimming safety.

## 13. What about blue-green algae (cyanobacteria) at public beaches?

The Health Unit response to blue-green algae at public beaches is not changing. The Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks (MECP) will continue to be responsible for sampling related to blue-green algae.

The Health Unit will continue to work with the MECP and advise the public when potentially harmful blue-green algae blooms are confirmed. When results suggest a potential health risk, the Health Unit will continue to take appropriate public health actions, such as posting on our [Harmful Algae Blooms webpage](#) and posting signage at affected beaches to warn the public.



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This approach remains separate from the recreational beach water program and will continue as it has in previous years.

#### **14. When will these changes take effect?**

Routine sampling will not be done in 2026, and the Health Unit is working with municipalities to post the new signs.

#### **15. Where can people find more information?**

Information will be available at [myhealthunit.ca/beaches](http://myhealthunit.ca/beaches), or by contacting a Public Health Inspector at the Health Unit with questions or concerns. We can be reached at 705-474-1400 ext. 5400 or through email at [environmental.health@healthunit.ca](mailto:environmental.health@healthunit.ca)