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DPH launches new tool to track beach closures

More than 50 remain closed due to high bacteria levels and other causes.



Savin Hill Beach was closed Wednesday due to high levels of bacteria in the water. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

By Zeina Mohammed | August 3, 2023

With more than 50 Massachusetts beaches closed due to heavy rain and sewage overflows, the Department of Public Health has launched a new tool to help people check the safety of their favorite swimming spots.

The [interactive dashboard](#) lets users track closures and see the results of water quality testing at all public beaches in the state. The new website, updated twice daily, replaces an older one that the department retired last year due to “technical limitations,” according to a DPH spokesperson.

For weeks, dozens of Massachusetts beaches have been closed because water quality tests determined that the water was polluted. This is largely because a type of sewer system used in 19 communities in the state is designed to discharge untreated sewage and storm water runoff into nearby waterways when it fills to capacity during heavy rainfall.

When water quality tests show water to be unsafe, DPH requires notices to be posted on the beach and online. Beaches can reopen once a follow-up test, usually conducted within a day or two, shows bacteria levels have returned to a safe level.

While the dashboard was in development, the department kept its [online list of closures](#) up to-date, which remains accessible, but the new site offers more information, including the results of previous tests.

“People can see: Is my beach closed? How often? How contaminated is it? It’s exciting,” said Chris Mancini, executive director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, which he said has been talking to DPH for two years about updating the way it communicates water quality information.

A quick search shows that, as of Wednesday, King’s Beach in Lynn, which was closed more than any other beach last year according to a 2022 report, was tested and closed at three different locations for high levels of bacteria that indicate the presence of human waste. The last shown test, collected

July 31th at Eastern Avenue, showed bacteria levels of 2,600 colony forming units per 100 milliliters, up from the previous day’s levels of 959 CFU/100 mL and well above the limit of 104 CFU/100 mL.

The dashboard also offers an interactive map of the state that shows all beaches as colored dots and allows users to hover over any location to see its name, town, closure status, and whether the beach is marine or freshwater. The color of each dot indicates the beach’s status with green dots meaning open, red signaling closures, orange indicating partially closed, and black dots identifying off-season beaches.

As of Wednesday, 52 beaches were closed, many concentrated around the Boston area, Gloucester, and other areas where [combined sewer outfalls](#) occur. In Boston, Malibu Beach, Savin Hill Beach, and Tenean Beach are closed, all due to excess levels of bacteria.

So far, there have been more closures this year compared to last year, which is not unusual given the high amount of rainfall, particularly in July, according to a department spokesperson.

Across the U.S., most swim-related illnesses are linked to fecal contamination, [according to DPH](#). People who swim in unsafe water risk stomach issues like nausea and vomiting, respiratory illnesses, skin rashes, and eye and ear infection. Children, the elderly, and people with weakened immune systems are at higher risk of getting sick.

According to the state website, any questions about the dashboard should be directed to the Bureau of Climate and Environmental Health at (617) 624-5757.