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Report: 'Potentially unsafe' levels of fecal bacteria found at 264 Massachusetts beaches

A child splashes in pooled water at King's Beach, Monday, July 03, 2017. Staff photo by Angela Rowlings.

"Potentially unsafe" levels of fecal bacteria were detected in the water at more than 200 Bay State beaches in 2020, a new report shows, posing a possible health hazard to swimmers.

"The bottom line is it's just gross. The idea of swimming in water that has sewage pollution in it is unacceptable. It's 2021 in Massachusetts," said Ben Hellerstein, state director of Environment Massachusetts, a non-profit group that published the report.

The "Safe for Swimming" report studied fecal indicator bacteria levels at 556 beaches in the commonwealth, from the North Shore to Cape Cod. Any swimming area that clocked at least one day of bacteria levels that exceeded the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recommendations made the list.

King's Beach in Lynn had the most days with "potentially unsafe" levels of fecal bacteria in the water last year, with 64 days counted. However, the water at that beach is only tested 85 days a year, meaning that the level of sewage pollution exceeded recommendations 75% of the days the water was tested.

Other beaches with notably high levels of fecal bacteria include Boston's Tenean Beach and Malibu Beach; Wollaston Beach in multiple spots in Quincy; and Landing Road in Plymouth.

Beaches in the state are most commonly contaminated by runoff stormwater and combined sewer overflows. Combined sewer overflows (CSOs) occur when a rush of stormwater overwhelms outdated wastewater systems, forcing pipes to unleash untreated sewage-strewn water directly into rivers and other waterways.

Swimmers who plunge into water with high levels of fecal bacteria can come out with skin rashes and diarrhea, among other nasty illnesses.

Gov. Charlie Baker signed into law a bill requiring wastewater plants to notify local news outlets when a CSO occurs. State beaches are also required to post signage indicating unsafe levels of bacteria in water, which most often occurs after a storm.

But there are flaws in the notification system, Hellerstein said: Information about the amount of sewage dumped and level of bacteria can take up to 24 or 48 hours to process. That means swimmers could unknowingly tread through "poopy" water, as Hellerstein called it.

The fastest remedies to beach pollution could come through grants from the American Rescue Plan Act, Massachusetts Rivers Alliance policy specialist Katharine Lange said.

"It's once in a generation funding, and these upgrades are things that are once in a generation needs," she said. "If we could get some of that money for capital projects, that would be huge. A lot of these cities are not sure where they would find the funding otherwise."

Another environmental group, Save the Harbor, disparaged the report as "overly simplistic" for grouping in all beaches that failed to meet EPA standards on one day in 2020.