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## Dozens of US Beaches Shut Down in July Due to High Levels of Toxic Bacteria



A sign indicates that the Dockweiler State Beach is closed to swimming after a sewage spill in Playa del Rey in Los Angeles County on July 13, 2021. (Frederic J. Brown/AFP Via Getty Images)

Dozens of beaches across the United States were forced to close this month following reports of an increase in toxic bacteria contaminating the water.

An advisory against bathing at beaches in states nationwide, including California, New York, New Jersey, Ohio, Massachusetts, and Washington state was issued by health officials this month after they determined that swimming is potentially unsafe due to high levels of bacteria.

In some cases, like with the recent closures in New York's Nassau County when 17 beaches were shut down, the contamination was reported after heavy rainfall caused runoff stormwater to impact the quality of bathing water, elevating bacteria levels.

Other components that regularly contribute to the pollution of coastal environments come from ships and boats, trash, sunscreen, and harmful algal blooms, according to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

It's extremely rare for beachgoers to get infected by the flesh-eating kind of toxic bacteria, which more often affects people with certain underlying health conditions.

"There's very few people that get sick and die in the United States, but when somebody dies, it makes the news because it's so graphic, and that's because you die within a day or two," Paul Gulig, a professor of molecular genetics and microbiology at the University of Florida School of Medicine told The Weather Channel on July 23, referring to *Vibrio vulnificus*, which is mostly present in marine environments such as estuaries, brackish ponds, or coastal areas.

Last year, a total of 328 beaches nationwide were reported as "potentially unsafe" for bathing activities on at least 25 percent of days that testing took place, according to a report (pdf) published on July 1 by the Environment America Research and Policy Center. This number represents more than 10 percent of the beaches surveyed.

"The department noted that the beaches were considered potentially unsafe if fecal indicator bacteria levels exceeded the "Beach Action Value"—a marine recreational water quality standard used to determine if bacteria levels are unsafe—in association with an estimated illness rate of 32 out of every 1,000 swimmers. The primary sources of fecal contamination include sewage overflows and runoff pollution.

"Even as Americans are back to enjoying the fresh sea breeze and splash of waves at the beach, pollution still plagues too many of the places where we swim," said John Rumpler, clean water program director for Environment America in a statement.

"Now is the time to fix our water infrastructure and stop the flow of pathogens to our beaches."

According to the report, out of the 556 beaches surveyed in Massachusetts, 264 were potentially unsafe for swimming at least one day in 2020, while 29 beaches were unsafe 25 percent or more of the days they were tested. The samples were measured against the EPA's highest warning level.

Critics of the research, such as advocacy nonprofit Save the Harbor/Save the Bay, say that samples collected in one day can't determine whether it's safe to swim or not.

"Though it makes a good headline, it is hyperbolic to suggest that swimming on 264 out of 457 beaches in Massachusetts poses a threat to human health because they may have failed one water quality test in 2020 after a summer rain," said Chris Mancini, executive director of Save the Harbor/Save the Bay.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

From NTD News



A cyclist with a trailer for children passes a "Beach Closed" sign on the boardwalk in Miami Beach, Fla., on March 22, 2020. (Cliff Hawkins/Getty Images)