

Public Health Madison and Dane County: Public Health works to keep swimming water safe

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Contact:

Sarah Mattes

(608) 242-6414

Madison WI - June 8, 2017 - No one wants a day at the beach or pool to make them sick. During the summer months, Public Health Madison & Dane County (PHMDC) Sanitarians and Laboratory staff check water quality at many public Madison and Dane County beaches, splash pads, and almost 400 indoor and outdoor pools to make sure the water is healthy to swim and play in.

Between Memorial Day and Labor Day the PHMDC Laboratory tests water at local swimming beaches for bacteria and blue-green algae to determine if they are safe for swimming and recreation, and to reduce chance for illness.

Water is tested at the beaches weekly, and if a water test shows concerning results, PHMDC will close the beach by posting signs and updating their [website](#). Water is then checked daily until levels of bacteria and blue-green algae return to acceptable levels.

Harmful algal blooms vary in their appearance, looking like scum, foam, or a mat, and despite their name, can be different colors. Lots of sunlight, high water temperatures and low wind levels usually cause them to grow.

Certain blue-green algae blooms produce toxins that can cause symptoms such as stomach upset, rashes, and respiratory irritation. Dogs that come into contact with

algal blooms can also get sick and sometimes die because their bodies are smaller and they tend to swallow a lot of water. Both people and pets should avoid being in water where algal blooms are present.

Should people discover they are in the water near a bloom, it is important that they avoid swallowing water and that they rinse off well when they get out. If people have symptoms they think are due to contact with blue-green algae blooms they should call their healthcare provider or the Poison Control Center at [1-800-222-1222](tel:1-800-222-1222). Dogs that have been in water near a bloom should also be rinsed well and a vet should be called if they seem ill after.

“While we always check for blue-green algae blooms while visiting beaches for routine monitoring, conditions can change quickly and algae may appear after our visit. If you suspect there is a bloom at one of our beaches, avoid swimming and contact us at [\(608\) 243-0357](tel:608-243-0357) so we can send someone out to check on the conditions at that beach,” says Jennifer Lavender-Braun, PHMDC Microbiologist.

“Once they arrive at a beach, we advise the public to always take a look at water conditions before getting into the water, especially after a heavy rainfall. That’s when stormwater runoff containing things like goose and pet waste can cause *E. coli* bacteria levels to be higher,” continues Lavender-Braun.

People can check to see if a beach is open before they go by checking the [PHMDC website](#), checking the department’s [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages, or by signing up for [beach condition alerts](#). Even if one beach is closed, others may be open.

In addition to beach testing, PHMDC Sanitarians visit pools and splash pads during the summer to test water for levels of disinfectant and collect a sample for bacteria testing done by the PHMDC lab, shutting a pool down if testing shows that bacteria levels are high or levels of disinfectant are not adequate.

Coming in contact with water contaminated with germs or chemicals in pools, splash pads and lakes can make people sick. Diarrheal illness is the most commonly reported water illness, causing diarrhea, vomiting, stomach cramps, loss of appetite and fever—sometimes lasting for weeks. All it takes is one person who has been experiencing diarrhea to contaminate a whole pool, even if it is well-maintained.

PHMDC Environmental Health Supervisor Beth Cleary says “it’s really important that people know that they play a big role in keeping the pools clean. That means

staying out of the water if they have diarrhea, showering before getting into the water to remove dirt and germs from the body, and washing hands well after using the bathroom or changing diapers.”

In addition, “parents should make sure kids take bathroom breaks hourly and help kids under the age of 5 with toileting and cleaning up after, because kids could more easily spread germs due to their developing skills in those areas,” says Cleary.

For more information about blue-green algae:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CGG50pfBEhI>

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/water/bg-algae/index.htm>

For more information about blue-green algae and dogs:

<https://www.dhs.wisconsin.gov/publications/p0/p00089.pdf>

For more information about Recreational Water Illness:

<https://www.cdc.gov/healthywater/swimming/swimmers/rwi.html>

To sign up for beach closure alerts:

<http://publichealthmdc.com/environmental/water/beaches/>